

Sex in Cassius Dio's *Roman History*: Portraying the *Malus Princeps*

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ABSTRACT

Cassius Dio, a 3rd century A.D. Roman historian, constructed a nine-volume history from the founding of Rome to the last emperor he lived to see, Severus Alexander (A.D. 222–A.D. 235). His account is remarkable in that he lends his skills as a historian, but also as a rhetorician, to construct the lives of every emperor until his death by including very detailed depictions of their lives. Dio interjects his views on each ruler, combined with the traditions found throughout the Roman historiography that preceded him, to make a compelling narrative on what makes a good and bad ruler. This thesis focuses on the bad rulers and a central theme present in bad rulership: sexual deviancy (or sexual misconduct). This thesis details the normal and non-normative sexual standards or practices that the elites of Roman society engaged in, commenting on acceptable practices and intolerable actions to construct a foundation by which the ancient audience could gauge the legitimacy or ability of an emperor. I examine how Cassius Dio described the sexual behaviors of the ruler, what they meant to the Roman elite, and why an emperor's sex life is relevant to his reign. The Julio-Claudians and Elagabalus are sampled for discussion and are used to explain why sexual deviancy is a powerful piece of rhetoric used in condemning a bad reign. For the Romans, sex is one measure by which an emperor can be praised for his continence or criticized due to his excessive or peculiar practices.

Sex in Cassius Dio's *Roman History*: Portraying the *Malus Princeps*

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Introduction

Cassius Dio, a Greek-born Roman senator who lived between A.D. 150–235, wrote a nine-volume history of Rome from the foundation of Rome to his contemporary time under the Severan Dynasty. Dio's narrative has annalistic, moralizing, and anachronistic elements interwoven from the beginning to the end, creating an exciting body of historical fact mixed in with some moralizing fiction that casts the past as precedent for understanding his present experience under the Severan Dynasty. In explaining his present, one he viewed as a period that had fallen far from the peak of Roman glory into decay or from "a kingdom of gold to iron to rust," Dio recounts the past rulers who had eased Rome along its decline.¹ Like many Roman historians before him, such as Plutarch, Suetonius, and Tacitus, Dio writes the biographies of each monarch, or *princeps*, and comments on the effectiveness or justness of their reign.² In a sense, Dio's appraisal of each emperor's warfare, politics, and building projects makes for a promising historical record, so much so that his record of Augustus is one of the most complete and well-read despite Dio's fragmented and epitomized text. Yet, it is not only the "traditional" history that Dio is concerned with but also the ethics of each ruler. How did the emperor treat the

¹ Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 71.36.4.

² In Earnest Cary's introduction, the translator of the Loeb edition I have used for this thesis, he argues that Dio had many sources and a wide range of material to read from in the twenty-two years it took him to research and write his history. Livy and Polybius were the most obvious to Cary. Dio also likely read Caesar's *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*. Plutarch, Suetonius, and Tacitus are possible sources, or at least Dio utilized the sources they used in their writing. Dio makes use of the *annals*, as evidenced by his naming of the eponymous archons of each year and a list of notable events that are recorded in each year. Suetonius and Tacitus are invoked frequently in this thesis as their biographies have similar accounts in Dio.

senate, what virtues did he possess, did he maintain the state's safety, or was he a *malus princeps*, a bad leader?

But what exactly makes a “bad” emperor? Dio and other Roman moralizers could draw on a body of traits in the *topos* of the tyrant. These behaviors include cruelty, suspicion, avarice, luxuriousness, and brutality. But one tyrannical trait stands above the rest in evoking a reaction: uncontrollable *libido*, or sexual desire, that runs rampant from the emperor’s personal life into the public realm, upsetting the sensibilities and legal rights of the senatorial class and demonstrating the emperor to be devoid of self-restraint and lacking the ability to control himself, let alone control the state. This thesis will examine sex in Dio’s *Roman History* account of two seminal dynasties: the Julio-Claudians and the Severans under whose rule he wrote. It will examine why he chose not to spare salacious details about emperors he disliked or, rather, what these details were and how they function within the narrative. This thesis examines the sexual deviancy of the emperor, his subordinates, family members, and, at times, the sexual exploitation of the senatorial class that emperors, such as Caligula, perpetrated against the most prestigious body of freeborn Roman citizens.³ Sexual misconduct and sexual exploitation are two of the most easily recognizable and frequent forms of tyranny present in Dio’s narrative. Dio uses the sexual misconduct of the emperors, both past and present, to enhance negative portrayals of their reigns while also using events that would outrage his audience, the Roman elite, to further his characterizations. This thesis aims to perform a historical, literary analysis of Dio’s work while

³ In this thesis, sexual deviancy will be referred to when discussing unusual sexual behaviors or practices that are outlined in Chapter One. Sexual deviancy incorporates behaviors that are *stuprum*, social taboo, or otherwise outrageous to the Roman elite.

interpreting, beyond the basic good or bad value assessments, why certain sexual activity is bad; what is the reader supposed to recognize as wrong about the behaviors?

I. Historiography: Cassius Dio

It is rare, except for a master's thesis like Tamara Bremert's *Sex in Suetonius* (2021), that a Roman historian has received a full-scale analysis of how they discuss or use sex within their narrative. That makes this thesis unique in that the sole aim is to elaborate on Dio's use of sex in his imperial biographies and what the reader is supposed to interpret, much like Bremert does with Suetonius. For Bremert, Suetonius used sex like no other historian, characterizing his "bad" rulers with slanderous sexual deviancy that makes its way into Roman historiography as fact. Her thesis also supports the critical point of this analysis, namely that Roman historians use sex as an eye-popping and evocative vice to demonstrate their disdain for a ruler they perceive as immoral.

To date, there has been no analysis of Cassius Dio that has focused principally on the topic of sex. Most monographs, such as Fergus Millar's *A Study of Cassius Dio* (1964), discuss topics ranging from Dio's background as a Greek consul and senator, the composition of his history, or how it contributes to a discourse on Roman views of monarchial rule. Most important for Millar's work is the argument that some modern readers who deem Dio's writing to have anachronistic factors is due to their failing to understand that some of Dio's seeming "misunderstandings" of political events, his insertion of rhetorical/made-up speeches, and his attribution of certain behaviors or actions are likely due to the influence of Elagabalus and Severus Alexander on Dio's political judgments.⁴ Millar's study, which is primarily concerned

⁴ F. M. Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 92.

with Dio's treatment of Cicero, Augustus, and Hadrian, does not shy away from discussing Dio's contemporary writing, demonstrating that Dio's account of scandalous behaviors, those behaviors that the thesis is most concerned with, are just as likely to be inspired by his contemporary rulers as much as the Roman traditions found in Suetonius or Tacitus.⁵

Two critical points Millar makes support my interpretations of Dio. The first, discussed in Millar's chapter "Political and Historical Views," is that Dio presents overall, except for his designed speeches, an unoriginal annalistic history following a strict Roman tradition.⁶ Dio was Greek, which makes his loyalty to the Roman system and tradition unique. Dio viewed himself as fully Roman and identified entirely with the senatorial elite. For my argument, Dio's identification with this class, as supported by other authors such as Aadlers in "Cassius Dio and the Greek World" (1986), will support my point that the Greek elite, or Greek senators, had much to gain from engaging with the social norms and traditions of the Romans. That Greeks stood to gain from the profits of the empire meant they were certainly aware of the Roman expectations for sexual propriety and manhood for its high-ranking elite. Dio, belonging to that class but writing in Greek, described sexual acts and vices that Greek and Latin reader would undoubtedly understand in terms of their shared Roman cultural and social implications. Simply put, being Greek is not a good enough reason to not understand the implications of sexual deviancy and exploitation in Latin terms, hence why this thesis interprets Dio's narrative in Latin terms such as *vir*, *pudicitia*, *libertas*, and other concepts that Greeks and Romans were familiar with and could recognize what Dio was insinuating.

⁵ Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio*, 170.

⁶ Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio*, 72.

The second point is more minor: Millar's belief that many of Dio's scandalous stories provide better entertainment value than historical fact. I argue that the historicity of the account is ultimately irrelevant. The reader would have understood Dio's description of the ruler's behaviors and actions, regardless of whether true or not, above and beyond their entertainment or shock value as part of his judgement of these leaders of the empire. Understanding why Dio would choose to discuss incest or adultery in connection with an emperor's ability to rule is just as crucial as Dio's discussion of other military or political aspects of their reign.

After a long hiatus following Millar's pioneering work, in the past twenty years there has been a rapid increase in the publications on Dio. Most notable are a trio of authors, Callian Davenport, Christopher Mallan, and Andrew G. Scott. In Scott's *Emperors and Usurpers* (2018), he examines Dio's treatment of the Severan Dynasty, from the death of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus to the reign of Severus Alexander. Scott places Dio's contemporary narrative towards the end of his life, around A.D. 229, which supports Adam Kemezis's reasoning that Dio wrote viciously about Elagabalus to show his acceptance of his successor, Severus Alexander, and thanks to Alexander for granting him a second consulship.⁷ Scott's emphasis on the period in which Dio's work is composed is helpful because it demonstrates the circumstances under which Dio wrote about contemporary and past rulers. Elagabalus functions as sort of a culmination of all the destructive vices of emperors like Caligula and Commodus.⁸ This progression establishes that Elagabalus's sexual misconduct and his appointment of low-rank or

⁷ Adam Kemezis, "The Fall of Elagabalus as Literary Narrative and Political Reality: A Reconsideration," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 65, no. 3 (2016): 348–90, 383.

⁸ Andrew G. Scott, *Emperors and Usurpers: An Historical Commentary on Cassius Dio's 'Roman History' Books 79(78)-80(80) (217-229 A.D.)*, American Classical Studies (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 91, 133, 137.

undeserving individuals to positions of prominence – both features of tyrannical reigns – had caused Roman society to be inverted. Dio claims the emperor promoted these undeserving people because of their sexual relationships with him, a trope which features prominently in Dio’s accounts of emperors like Caligula, Nero, and Domitian. Inadvertently, Scott provides this thesis with support for Dio’s discussion of the sexual behavior of his contemporaries, presenting parallels in the Roman past. Outside of Elagabalus’s reign, Scott provides little support for this thesis, as sexual behavior is not a principal aspect of his monograph which focuses on the final rulers of Dio’s history.

Mallan and Davenport, who have each written a series of journal articles ranging in focus from Dio’s accounts of rape of Lucretia to the sexual behavior of Caracalla, combined their efforts in *Emperors and Political Culture in Cassius Dio’s Roman History* (2021). In this work Davenport and Mallan and several other historians, such as Kemezis, construct an extensive analysis of Dio’s political outlook, his methods and sources and explore his characterization of the change from Republic to Principate. Furthermore, in the epilogue, Christopher Pelling, attends to recent studies of Dio, in which scholars have examined his presentation of events of his own life and how these presentations may have affected his historical interpretation or biographical presentation of past emperors, like Nero and Caligula.⁹ This thesis is a literary analysis with a focus on a particular theme, and the idea that Dio used intra-textual patterning to demonstrate that “old times” had been revived in his contemporary Rome: sex was a recognized political issue of his day and became a necessary characteristic of the evil emperors of the past. Pelling’s closing remarks are also crucial in support of this thesis’s argument about Dio’s

⁹ Caillan Davenport and Christopher Mallan, eds., *Emperors and Political Culture in Cassius Dio’s Roman History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 316.

audience, namely that just because he wrote in Greek did not mean the audience was necessarily Greek. A point that I emphasize when using Latin concepts to describe the events Dio is narrating and argue the audience would have recognized them as such.

In addition to Mallan's chapter on Tiberius, which this thesis draws on to help interpret certain aspects of Dio's account of Tiberius's reign in Chapter Two, Davenport¹⁰ Davenport elaborates that Romans tried to make sense of court politics, and oftentimes, as with Agrippina and Nero's alleged incestuous relationship, sex is invoked as a reason for a prominent person coming to power or a deterioration of that relationship leading to their removal from power. Discussion and rumors of sexual behavior played into a question of political stability that mattered to Romans all across the social spectrum. Finally, sex played into a discourse of broader themes of imperial suitability. Building on Davenport's insight, this thesis further explores, in a limited scope, what sexual deviancy means when the emperor is responsible, his subordinates or family members are responsible, or when he has forced a citizen to do an ignoble deed. Finally, the closing remarks of Davenport and Mallan's introduction state that they "suspect there is still much more Dio can tell the historian of ideas, religion, or gender studies."¹¹ It is precisely in that vein of gender studies, an area of which scholarship around Dio is lacking, that this thesis makes its arguments.

At the beginning of this historiographical review, I claimed that no monographs or theses have solely focused on sex in Cassius Dio's history. However, one important journal article provided insight into what sexual misbehaviors Dio mentioned across multiple reigns. Chrysanthos Chrysanthou's "Sex and Power in Cassius Dio's *Roman History*" (2020) considers

¹⁰ Davenport, "News, Rumour, and Political Culture in the *Roman History*," 65.

¹¹ Davenport and Mallan, *Emperors and Political Culture*, 29.

Dio's focus on sexual vice and outrage as an index of the monarch's ability to rule and the nature of their reign. He outlines how such behavior offends the senate, undermines the political stability of Rome through the promotion of paramours, and causes the emperor to neglect his duties. His template characterizes the political reality of Dio and explains why such behavior is treated poorly in his narrative, especially when high-ranking individuals are involved.

Chrysanthou provides a foundation, built on scholarship solely focused on Roman sexuality, for understanding what, in Dio, what the sexual deviancy of the emperor could mean about his identity as a *vir* and ability to rule. The central point is that sexual deviancy or the exploitation of others at the emperor's hand makes the emperor a tyrant, and his rule can be assessed by his sexual vices, which leads to many problems necessitating his removal. This thesis builds upon Chrysanthou's work by explaining every possible implication of that bad behavior from the crime committed to what the reader should understand about sexual behavior and its consequences.

II. Historiography: Sex

In Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, Volumes Two and Three, he establishes one of the basic principles that has come to define our understanding of Roman sexuality, despite criticisms that have been targeted about his historical understanding of the Greeks and Romans.¹² Foucault popularized the idea of an active/passive sexual dynamic, in which the male partner must always penetrate a passive partner. Be the passive partner male or female, if the dominant male of high

¹² Maia Kotrosits, "Penetration and Its Discontents: Greco-Roman Sexuality, the 'Acts of Paul and Thecla,' and Theorizing Eros without the Wound," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 27, no. 3 (2018): 343–66, 343.

status was penetrating, it was a socially valid or acceptable act. Subsequent scholarship, like this thesis, has aimed to demonstrate the nuances in this relationship and establish who in the social hierarchy of Rome were socially acceptable and legal targets of sexual acts by a male. What Foucault identifies is the power dynamic aspect of the sexual act, inherent in the dichotomy of passive/active, which makes both roles complex in the Roman world, and discerning that nuance is the entire focus of Chapter One.

Foucault helped start a new branch of historical interest. Many scholars have since published works describing sexuality and gender amongst the Romans. Amy Richlin's *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor* (1983) opened the door for the "priapic model" of Roman sex, where the male is the dominating and aggressive penetrator of sexual partners, as well as generating ideas that certain sexual acts were disgusting and taboo and degraded the participants involved, a theme this thesis explores when Nero "devours" the genitals of some prisoners in a disgusting "game."¹³ Yet, Richlin's primary work is only consulted for the establishing of a priapic model or establishing the dichotomy of penetrator/penetrated. Her most useful work for this thesis is the article "Not before Homosexuality: The Materiality of the *Cinaedus* and the Roman Law against Love between Men" (1993), which presents a near thesis length amount of information about sexual norms, proper manly behavior, and the assertion of a possible homosexual subculture for men in Roman society. Her discussion on the *cinaedus*, which she translates to the modern pejorative "faggot" or "unmanly man," is essential to understanding the proper behavior men should exhibit and, by extension, the proper behavior, and traits of the Roman *princeps*. She examines Roman

¹³ Dio, *Roman History*, 63.13.2.

poets, satirists, and laws like the *Lex Scantinia* to understand the identity of the passive male and the dominant male. Her extensive discussion on the progress of a male to *vir*, true Roman man, status, and the incidents or sexual behaviors that could undermine that, from being penetrated to penetrating unlawful subjects, helps this thesis place the behavior of emperors into a multitude of unmanly acts that would undermine his ability to rule, control his household, or maintain his manly *vir* status.

Judith Hallett and Marilyn Skinner's *Roman Sexualities* (1997) offers 12 essays by different scholars that discuss different aspects of Roman sexuality from the perspective of women, slaves, and same-sex partners. Several of the essays can be argued as having a basis in wishing to make visible underrepresented historical groups and non-heterosexual relationships. All of the authors, as well as Skinner and Hallett themselves, utilize the passive/active model where a dominant male is the penetrator of his male or female partner. Jonathan Walters's chapter "Invading the Roman Body: Manliness and Impenetrability in Roman Thought" is helpful for this thesis, as he defines many of the behaviors of true *vir*. Most insightful is his claim that elite men were "impenetrable penetrators" who were free, because of their freeborn citizen-male status, from having their bodily autonomy wrested from them, sexually and physically, as even being beaten was a sign of slavery. They could not honorably or legally be subject to sexual or physical acts unbecoming of their status as *viri* and citizens. Walters examines the laws around sex, the proper penetrable partners for a man, and the right to protect oneself from sexual assaults in a convincing essay that contributes to this thesis's construction of the sexual norms for Roman society.

A final scholar that this thesis owes much to regarding its construction of sexuality in Chapter One is Rebecca Flemming's chapter "Sexuality" (2010) in the *Oxford Handbook of*

Roman Studies. Flemming offers no unique argument from the other scholars who have constructed the basic outline of Roman sexuality, which focuses on penetration and active/passive roles. However, her concise outline of gender roles and acceptable sexual actions for a man, such as sex with boy slaves, prostitutes, or one's wife, or sex within marriage for a woman, alongside unacceptable behaviors, such as same-sex relations for women or adult men, also provides the material to construct an outline of sexuality.

All of these studies of sexuality and others, such as Ruth Karras's "Active/Passive, Acts/Passions: Greek and Roman Sexualities" (2000), David Mattingly's "Power, Sex, and Empire" (2011), and Kelly Olson's "Masculinity, Appearance, and Sexuality: Dandies in Roman Antiquity" (2014) serve to construct a standard model of Roman sexual norms and taboos, reinforcing the active/passive dichotomy and the role of a dominant penetrating male. Important to all is the emasculating effect of acting outside of these norms, pursuing sex in excess, or having illicit sexual relations that could put at risk one's status as a whole person (*fama*); ruin one's reputation and chances for political office; or even lead to threats against one's life. This thesis draws on the construction of sexuality established in many of these studies. I examine Dio's work considering Roman sexuality to determine what he is accusing the emperors of in a literal sense. I interpret, under the lens of sexual propriety, how Dio portrays the emperor and what the audience should understand in those portrayals. Every action, whether the emperor has acted heinously or caused others to perform actions unbecoming of their status or rank, is used by Dio to mark the emperor a tyrant.

III. Method

All nine volumes of Cassius Dio's *Roman History* have been analyzed for this thesis. However, due to the limited scope and length of a master's thesis, certain elements are not developed

below. Initially, this thesis's goal was to interpret the portrayal of every emperor that Dio mentions in connection with some sexual act, whether he committed adultery, abused women, committed incest, submitted to sexual desires, or any other deviant act. However, the project exceeded the limitations of a master's thesis. I have narrowed the focus to Dio's treatment of the Julio-Claudians, except for Augustus, and, in a comparative conclusion which highlights how his contemporary circumstances may have helped frame his accounts of those bad emperors, and Dio's treatment of Elagabalus, the pinnacle figure of sexual depravity in his *Roman History*. Augustus is left out due to Dio's apparent admiration of the emperor. Dio finds few faults in him and defends others, such as his affairs with married women, which Livia pretends to know nothing of, making her a good *exemplum* of a Roman woman.¹⁴ Millar, Davenport, Mallan, Scott, and De Blois all argue that Augustus was a favorite of Dio for his ability to work well with this senate and his appearance as a *civilis princeps*.¹⁵ The successors come into question, with Dio elaborating some sexual outrage in each reign. Tiberius had orgies with freeborn youths; Caligula committed incest, adultery, and made an imperial brothel; Claudius allowed the Romans to be domineered over by his adulterous wife, Messalina, while he indulged in his sexual vices; Nero castrated a boy, Sporus, and made him his wife while also becoming the husband of Pythagoras. Tiberius and Claudius are ambiguously bad rulers, while Caligula and Nero are tyrannical. This thesis examines the language and implications present in each biography and the intratextual connections to events in the past and future. I analyze Dio's view of the emperors in

¹⁴ Dio, *Roman History*, 58.2.5.

¹⁵ Lukas de Blois, "The Perception of Emperor and Empire in Cassius Dio's '*Roman History*.'" *Ancient Society* 29 (1998): 267–81; 268; Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio*, 72-74; Andrew G. Scott, "Dio and Herodian on the Assassination of Caracalla," *The Classical World* 106, no. 1 (2012): 15–28, 21.

regard to what their sexual behavior or outrages implies about their ability to rule. Most of the following interpretations draw on Latin terms of vices, virtues, or legal status, such as *infamis*, *pudicitia*, and *libertas*. I acknowledge a shortcoming in not reading Greek. However, I argue that Roman or Greek readers likely spoke both languages as members of the elite class and Dio's work was directed towards them. As such, I largely abstain from the argument regarding Dio's readership or his intended audience (Greeks or Latins), as Pelling noted in his "Epilogue" that debate is still raging with no foreseeable agreement. The Latin terms for virtues and vices, namely the virtue of *pudicitia*, would have been recognized in Greek society just as in Rome, mainly because some virtues, such as *pudicitia* and Dio's Greek *sophrosyne*, were nearly interchangeable. This thesis's construction of sexuality relies on a sexual norm that has existed for around 400 years (200 B.C.- A.D. 200).¹⁶ Anything sexual will be interpreted into Latin, and those vices and virtues will be discussed in their Latin forms. These forms were recognizable to the audience. The audience could at least imply what Dio was referring to without having it spelled out; bad behavior and sexual deviance are easily recognizable.

IV. Summary

This thesis embarks on a project like Tamara Bremert's recent master thesis on the use of sex in Suetonius. By examining leading scholars of Cassius Dio to understand his political views and writing style, as well as commentaries on the reigns of multiple emperors, I am contributing to a literary analysis that extends beyond typical accounts of political acts and judgments on an emperor's reign and turning my interest to culture and society. I will explain what Dio writes and

¹⁶ Amy Richlin, "Not before Homosexuality: The Materiality of the Cinaedus and the Roman Law against Love between Men," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3, no. 4 (1993): 523–73, 531.

what the ancient reader would interpret. Chapter One establishes Roman views of sexuality, Chapter Two examines Dio's account of the Julio-Claudians, and Chapter Three concludes the thesis by discussing Dio's contemporary reality and restating why sex matters in the Roman world, especially if the emperor engages in sexual deviancy. Failure to control one's desires, to engage in adultery, incest, same-gender sex acts, or other deviant acts undermined the image of the emperor, his ability to rule, and the nature of governance in the Roman world; if the emperor could not control himself, how could he control others?

Chapter One: Roman Sexuality: Men, Tyrants, and Women

Since the publishing of Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, scholarship has erupted surrounding the ancient sexual practices and explored the nuanced behavior and norms that were socially acceptable. Criticisms of “unhistorical” writing have since diminished Foucault’s work; however, he ignited a fascination and need for revision into the social and cultural histories of the ancient world. Sex in Roman society and historiography is prominent in determining the moral character of men, women, and the emperor. The sex life and behavior of the person discussed have detrimental implications on their deserving of citizen status, their ability to rule, and the overall virtue that one can possess. Chapter one is dedicated to structuring the nuanced differences in sexual behaviors from the dichotomy of active/passive roles, the legal implications, the moral underpinnings of sexual actions, and the consequences or disgust a man or woman could incur from their sexual preferences. This chapter explores tropes of tyranny, effeminate men, the necessity that men be the “active” partners, and the general anxiety about ensuring sexual normalcy in adult male and female citizens and the youth. It is necessary to provide a broad outlook on normal and unnatural sexual behaviors and perceptions about them for this thesis as the following examination of Cassius Dio’s *Roman History* in chapters two and three explores the theme of sex and its role in undermining the ability of an emperor to rule effectively and the implications sexual misconduct have for the ancient audience.

This chapter relies on the scholarship of the past few decades to construct an comprehensive summary of Roman’s understanding of sex to provide the necessary details for the examination of Dio’s depictions of bad emperors’ sexual deviancy in the chapters below. This thesis seeks to avoid any anachronistic views and rather focuses on what sexual acts the Romans believed to be “bad,” a socially constructed notion that focused on what sexual activities

were appropriate to elite Roman men and women and they expressed and enforced through laws, social coercion or shaming, and legal acts to prevent social decay through luxurious self-indulgence in perceived unnatural sexual desires. This discussion centers on opinions held by elite authors such as Suetonius, Tacitus, Martial, Catullus, Plutarch, and modern scholars, who have articulated a fuller understanding of what sexual activities Roman elites thought was proper or abhorrent. This chapter reveals and outlines standards and practices held by the elite, not the average Roman man or woman, whose sex lives and morality the elite writers had very little interest in accounting for or accounting for it only where the emperor enabled it himself. It is doubly important that the elite wrote for the elite, mainly elite men, who observed or recounted the abnormal or odd behaviors and sexual preferences of the *princeps* to lampoon him and his reign or to demonstrate why he was unfit to rule. To understand these criticisms, an outline of their behaviors, of normal and abnormal sex, and the status of an authentic Roman *vir* is critical as it comes to the forefront of Roman historical narratives, such as Dio, but rather than passing over it in a moment of awe or disgust, it is necessary to examine what do these behaviors *mean*? This thesis is an effort in a historical literature review and a sociological application of hermeneutics, where the interpretation of social events or behaviors focuses on the interpretation of the participants or audience. Why is the emperor engaging in same-gender sex acts unacceptable? Why is wearing certain clothes, acting, or dancing associated with feminine behaviors revolting for the Romans? Why is it important to be a true *vir*?

I. The Sex Life of Roman Viri: The Proper Man, The Path to Manhood, and The Law

There is an accepted idea in the discourse of Roman sexuality that Roman sexual history “moves toward a crescendo of eroticism” in which Romans did tolerate some bad behavior “but not

vicious or orgiastic” excess.¹⁷ Amy Richlin asserts that this model and notion of sexual identity remained consistent for at least 400 years, from around 200 B.C.E to 200 C.E, which is important to the construction of this thesis as ideas of sexuality and proper sexual roles presented here, however generalized, will be the ones used to assess Cassius Dio’s discussion of emperors from the Augustan period through the end of the Severan dynasty, implying that Dio shared the ideas of Roman elites (senators, equestrians, officeholders, aristocrats) throughout the Principate.¹⁸ For this discussion, two main points are of consensus in scholarship: that sexuality is socially constructed according to social order and that there is an active/passive dichotomy of sex that characterized the ancient Roman world.¹⁹ This dichotomy or the “penetrative paradigm (priapic model)” of sex is the normative model for Roman manliness and is also associated with a phallogocentric model, where the “penetration of a man’s penis served as the basis of sexual encounters.”²⁰ The Roman elite, who are the sources of our understanding of sexuality, equated masculinity with penetrative sexual behavior, which structured their sense of selfhood and social relations.²¹ The dichotomy was critically important to their perception of a respectable man.²² Sex was a one-way street for a Roman man, and inserting his penis “established or reinforced his

¹⁷ David J. Mattingly, “Power, Sex, and Empire,” In *Imperialism, Power, and Identity: Experiencing the Roman Empire: Experiencing the Roman Empire*, 94–122 (Princeton University Press, 2011); 96.

¹⁸ Richlin, “Not Before Homosexuality,” 531; Jacob Latham, “‘Fabulous Clap-Trap’: Roman Masculinity, the Cult of Magna Mater, and Literary Constructions of the *Galli* at Rome from the Late Republic to Late Antiquity,” *The Journal of Religion* 92, no. 1 (2012): 84–122, 90. Roman ideas of masculinity endured until the “high empire.”

¹⁹ Ruth Mazo Karras, “Active/Passive, Acts/Passions: Greek and Roman Sexualities,” *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 4 (2000): 1250–65, 1250.

²⁰ Tamara Bremert, “Sex in Suetonius: Sexual Material as a Characterization Device for Tyrannical Emperors,” Master’s Thesis, The University of Adelaide (2021): 1–116; 21–23.

²¹ Kotrotsits, “Penetration and its Discontents,” 343.

²² Karras, “Active/Passive, Acts/Passion,” 1260.

masculine power and authority” and also fulfilled his natural biological function, which is a moral good.²³ For the Romans, masculinity was in a fragile middle ground between conservative values and luxurious excess, where deviating from norms could have catastrophic effects on one’s public standing and political career.²⁴ Future research would benefit from an analyzation of the wide array of poetry, legal texts, and other Roman literature that discusses sexual behavior, however, due to the scope of this thesis, I have elected to examine scholarship that deals with hypersexuality as a theme throughout the Roman historiography to make an outline of idealized sexual behavior.²⁵

To briefly generalize sexual categories, there was a “social pyramid” with a small class of *vir* (true men) in good standing at the top, freeborn male youths and respectable women below them, and at the bottom, there were slaves, prostitutes, dancers, actors, pimps, and others, all of latter were sexually penetrable by *vir*.²⁶ Female attributes were applied to demean men, especially ones who fell prey to their vices, and they were all the more damned for it because they were threats to notions of what constituted a *vir*.²⁷ Sexual propriety was expected at a all

²³ Jonathan Walters, “Invading The Roman Body: Manliness and Impenetrability in Roman Thought,” In *Roman Sexualities*, edited by Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner, 29–44 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 30; Bremert, “Sex in Suetonius,” 25.

²⁴ Latham, “Fabulous Clap-Trap,” 88.

²⁵ Bremert, “Sex in Suetonius,” 24.

²⁶ Walters, “Invading the Roman Body,” 41.

²⁷ Guy De La Bedoyere, “Virtue, Honour and Chastity,” in *Domina: The Women Who Made Imperial Rome* (Yale University Press, 2018), 17-38, 20.

times for male Roman citizens, and anything abnormal was an affront to normal sexuality as governed by the Roman *mos maiorum*.²⁸

A freeborn Roman citizen male was to maintain a hierarchical relationship with his sexual partners, in which he was to be the active partner and the penetrated was a woman, his wife, concubine, prostitute, or a boy, legally a non-citizen boy.²⁹ It was tolerable, though not necessarily respected, for an adult Roman male to engage in intercourse with both women and boys as long as he was the penetrator.³⁰ Not all Roman males were bisexual, but it did occur and was tolerable as long as the higher-status male, for the sake of his reputation and political ambition, played the active role. One aspect of his sexuality was his position as a penetrator and the dominance he exerted from it.³¹ A man's ability to exert sexual domination, while fulfilling his biological function, and penetrate reinforced a social hierarchy, with his sexual prowess and superiority as an indicator or accessory of his social rank. For a man, the correct behavior fortified his social position and made his body impenetrable while allowing for the domination of others' bodies.³² Men were able to have sexual encounters with prostitutes, mistresses, their wives, and boys, so long as they were in the active role, respecting social rules, and avoiding censure; they had to exercise extreme caution to not engage in sexual relationships that are

²⁸ Robert Sharp, "Incontinentia, Licentia, Et Libido: The Juxtaposition of Morality and Sexuality during the Roman Republic," *James Madison Undergraduate Research Journal* 2, no. 1 (2014–15): 6–12, 9; Michael B. Charles, "Nero and Sporus Again," *Latomus* 73, no. 3 (2014): 667–85, 674.

²⁹ Jussi Rantala, "Ruling in Purple ... and Wearing Make-up: Gendered Adventures of Emperor Elagabalus as Seen by Cassius Dio and Herodian," In *Exploring Gender Diversity in the Ancient World*, edited by Allison Surtees and Jennifer Dyer, 118–28 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 124; Richlin, "Not Before Homosexuality," 525, 528.

³⁰ Richlin, "Not Before Homosexuality," 525.

³¹ Mattingly, "Sex, Power, and Empire," 110.

³² Kotrosits, "Penetration and Its Discontents," 344.

prohibited.³³ This is not to say that all such actions enhanced his reputation or virility, but that they were tolerable to an extent.

The Roman elite, the senators, equestrians, officeholders, and the rich, if they were freeborn and enjoyed the privileges afforded to them as a citizen in good standing, are the “men” referred to throughout the thesis. These men were supposed to be the active and women the passive, or men were the penetrators and women penetrated, with the man's status affecting his acceptable erotic relationships.³⁴ Romans drew a sharp distinction between what was the proper target of a man's sexual desires, that being a boy or woman versus an adult freeborn male-male sexual encounter, which was intolerable because it was outside of social norms and considered unhealthy and unnatural.³⁵ Even worse was to be the penetrated in the relationship, which was conceptualized as a betrayal of his citizen status as a *vir*.³⁶ With each encounter, the receptive male becomes tainted or violated by the act, sullyng his body. Penetrating a boy was tolerable, and he was considered desirable for his lack of hair and unmatured genitals, which was

³³ Walters, “Invading the Roman Body,” 32. A true *vir* had to maintain his good standing and avoid censure because censure would remove his status as a *vir*. Only adult males who maintained their good standing could be called *vir*; Rebecca Flemming, “Sexuality,” In Alessandro Barchiesi and Walter Scheidel, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Studies* (2010; online edn, Oxford Academic, 18 Sept. 2012): 797-814, 802; Mattingly, “Sex, Power, and Empire,” 109.

³⁴ Kotrosits, “Penetration and its Discontents,” 347-348; Karras, “Active/Passive, Acts/Passion,” 1255.

³⁵ Kelly Olson, “Masculinity, Appearance, and Sexuality: Dandies in Roman Antiquity,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 23, no. 2 (2014): 182–205, 184; Richlin, “Not before Homosexuality,” 525, 530.

³⁶ Bremert, “Sex in Suetonius,” 25; Richlin, “Not Before Homosexuality,” 526.

aesthetically pleasing, but desirability waned as he matured.³⁷ Pederasty was only tolerable when performed on a non-citizen male boy, and the boy should have been his own slave.³⁸

Not only boys but enslaved men, though usually in bad taste, could be penetrated, though the practice could be irregular and not necessarily applicable to every slave and master. If a slave was freed, making them a freedman or freedwoman, they were still tainted from their association with sexual passivity at the hands of their master, and their assumed penetrability contributed to the disdain freed slaves were surrounded with.³⁹ It was acceptable, if not unavoidable, for a slave to undergo penetration, but a freeborn male did not tolerate that passive sexuality. A slave was especially sexually vulnerable, making him less than a man, incapable of becoming or being a *vir*, which regulated him to being called a *puer* all his life, tainted with the sexual passivity he possibly experienced. If one was penetrated, they were gendered feminine, even if they were a man, because they were “defiled” and thus inferior.⁴⁰ Even a freed slave, though not the norm, could be subject to sexual advances by their former master, though usually acceptable if the elite man had made the woman his concubine.⁴¹ It was not normal for freedmen to continue this relationship after their manumission. If it did occur, the freedman, now a citizen, was expected to

³⁷ Bremert, “Sex in Suetonius,” 25.

³⁸ James L. Butricia, “Some Myths and Anomalies in the Study of Roman Sexuality” *Journal of Homosexuality* 49, nos. 3-4, (2005): 209-269, 219. Plautus suggests that it is the “duty of a slave boy to bend over”; Richlin, “Not Before Homosexuality,” 530.

³⁹ Walters, “Invading the Roman Body,” 30. The inability to protect one’s body from penetration was a key indication of low status. A true *vir* could defend his body from invasive assaults and it is one of the key features of his high-ranking status; Mattingly, “Sex, Power, and Empire,” 109; Richlin, “Not Before Homosexuality,” 533.

⁴⁰ Karras, “Active/Passive, Acts/Passion,” 1256, 1261.

⁴¹ Judith Evans-Grubbs, “‘Marriage More Shameful Than Adultery’: Slave-Mistress Relationships, ‘Mixed Marriages’, and Late Roman Law,” *Phoenix* 47, no. 2 (1993): 125–54: 127; Mattingly, “Power, Sex, and Empire,” 109.

adhere to citizen-like behaviors, foregoing penetration. Penetration by his patron could open himself up to disgrace, and the patron himself could be charged as letting his freedman have unnatural influence over him.⁴² The freedman's worthiness to even be a citizen may be questioned.⁴³ However, this distinction between *puer* and *vir* helped create an aspect of the identity of a *vir* as a man who is not penetrated, but also performs his natural biological function, especially when fulfilling his social role as *paterfamilias*.⁴⁴

The critical point is that it was not always necessarily what one did that made it decent, but “who one did it to and what role was played.”⁴⁵ To be penetrated as an adult male, or penetrate someone with a beard or adult characteristics, especially a freeborn man, was in a category of polluted acts, horrific, and seen by satirists such as Juvenal as being “worse than any debaucheries of women.”⁴⁶ Though this is not to say that the masculinity of the penetrator is in question, even penetrating other men reinforced one's own masculine identity.⁴⁷ Causing a freeborn male to be penetrated, willingly of his own accord, was bad enough, but to rape a freeborn male was the worst of all, associated with the rape of a *materfamilias* and the perpetrator was subject to capital punishment, especially if his target was a boy. Rape, and oral rape, would damage the *vir*'s reputation so severely that he might not be allowed to speak in

⁴² David Wardle, “Suetonius and Galba’s Taste in Men: A Note.” *Latomus* 74, no. 4 (2015): 1006–13, 1012.

⁴³ Butricia, “Some Myths and Anomalies,” 215.

⁴⁴ Walters, “Invading the Roman Body,” 31. The sexual partner of a man had to be described as “an other,” whether male or female because the dominant sexual role was only appropriate for a man to possess in the act. Those incapable of such could not be equal to him; Richlin, “Not Before Homosexuality,” 536.

⁴⁵ Mattingly, “Power, Sex, and Empire,” 108.

⁴⁶ Olson, “Masculinity, Appearance, and Sexuality,” 184; Richlin, “Not Before Homosexuality,” 536, 543.

⁴⁷ Karras, “Active/Passive, Acts/Passion,” 1256.

public, which made it a horrific crime. A man's lust should be directed at prostitutes, his wife, and his slaves; anything other than that was to be considered *stuprum*, a sex crime.⁴⁸ If a man committed a sex crime or *stuprum*, he would be penalized based on who the crime was done to, as slaves, actors, dancers, and prostitutes were not protected, there was no *stuprum* involved, but if it were a virgin girl, widow, someone else's wife, or a freeborn male/boy the man would pay the price.⁴⁹ If a man himself was penetrated, it was also considered *stuprum* for the penetrator, especially if his target was a freeborn male or boy.⁵⁰

Masculinity was a fragile condition, and a man's unimpeachable position as a penetrator, not tainted by abnormal sexual acts, meant he could properly manifest his rank and authority, which was not achieved only by being born male but by maintaining hyper-vigilance from his youth till his assumption of the *toga virilis* to not be feminized and thus forfeit his social status, control over his family or slaves, and be at risk for engaging in future inappropriate liaisons.⁵¹ Failure to control his household meant his family was polluted, his *domus* tainted, and he was open to *injuria* or indecencies regarding his role as a current or future *paterfamilias*, which was the most crucial role outside of a political position he could have and a symbol of his virtue as a man.⁵² It was not performing the active sexual role alone, but the biological fulfillment as part of

⁴⁸ Flemming, "Sexuality," 802; Bremert, "Sex in Suetonius," 25.

⁴⁹ Richlin, "Not Before Homosexuality," 568.

⁵⁰ Mattingly, "Sex, Power, and Empire," 110.

⁵¹ Karras, "Active/Passive, Acts/Passion," 1261.

⁵² Richard P. Saller, "'Familia, Domus', and the Roman Conception of the Family," *Phoenix* 38, no. 4 (1984): 336–55: 349–353; Nephelē Papakonstantinou, and Anne Stevens, "Raptus and Roman Law: Teaching about Sexual Crime in the Schools of Rhetoric (Rome, Turn of the First and Second Centuries CE)," *Clio. Women, Gender, History*, no. 52 (2020): 28.

his sexual identity and the role that came with it (*paterfamilias*) that had be achieved to enhance or complete his status as a *vir*,

Abnormal behavior, or being penetrated as an adult man, was considered in itself boyish and an improper characteristic of boyhood, one that should not be carried over into adulthood, especially by a freeborn male.⁵³ Young boys were seen as smooth-shaven and *delicati* sex objects, and a true Roman man was supposed to move on, after his rise to adulthood, to have “normal” sexual relations with his wife. There was considerable anxiety around a freeborn youth's rise to manhood, and many were encouraged by their families to engage with prostitutes to prepare them to move from desiring boys to proper conjugal sex.⁵⁴ Ideally, the wife was supposed to turn the husband off from *pueri* to vaginal intercourse.⁵⁵ Freeborn boys, who were on pace to become *vir*, had to be distanced from the sexual norms of the elite men. It was a great source of anxiety that a young freeborn male could be attracted to or seduced by an older man, and getting the boy safely married was desired to ensure the safety of his status as a *vir* and his family's dignity.⁵⁶ The Roman male's wedding was exceptionally important, and any man cast in the role of “being wed” is considered unnatural in that he is playing the passive role, a theme presented in Nero's marriage to Pythagoras in Dio's review of his reign. A wedding asserts that he is a proper *vir* and not the penetrated. He is supposed to penetrate the acceptable figure of his wife.

⁵³ Richlin, “Not Before Homosexuality,” 534.

⁵⁴ Flemming, “Sexuality,” 812, Proper sex, according to stoic thought, was to be done within marriage only for the purpose of procreation. Anything else would be excessive and deviant sexual encounters where there was a lack of restraint that a man should possess.

⁵⁵ Richlin, “Not Before Homosexuality,” 534-535.

⁵⁶ Richlin, “Not Before Homosexuality,” 537.

Furthermore, he is supposed to have a respectable marriage where children are produced, where he can keep his patrimony at full strength, and where his family serves as a symbol of prestige and honor.⁵⁷ Later, more conservative stoics would deem any relationship that did not have a procreative goal unnecessary and a failure to exercise self-control due to the impossibility of procreation.⁵⁸ Failure to engage in a normal relationship would also undermine his virility and lead to the idea that he and his manhood were the problem, thus emasculating him if he could not perform the proper role of a man.⁵⁹ If a male is penetrated instead of penetrating, he fails in that role, as does a freeborn boy who is penetrated and is disrupted from his course to manhood, risking becoming a *cinaedus*.⁶⁰ Protecting him until he matured meant less anxiety for the family, for as he started to manifest adult male characteristics, he became less of an object of desire. A boy's youth, until the assumption of his *toga virillis*, was a susceptible time, and the wearing of the *toga virillis* is what marked him apart from the *puer*; the toga was the symbol of a man's Romanness.⁶¹ It gave him the rights of a Roman male citizen, such as making a will, having legal testimony, and acting as a witness, which was withdrawn from him if he had been penetrated or deviated from acceptable norms, those norms being the objectification of women, no sexual

⁵⁷ Saller, "Familia Domus," 336, 349; Mattingly, "Power, Sex, and Empire," 98.

⁵⁸ Michael B. Charles and Eva Anagnostou-Laoutides, "Unmanning An Emperor: Otho in the Literary Tradition," *The Classical Journal* 109, no. 2 (2014): 199–222, 205.

⁵⁹ David Wardle, "Caligula and His Wives," *Latomus* 57, no. 1 (1998): 109–26, 117.

⁶⁰ Walters, "Invading the Roman Body," 33. The penetration of a young freeborn male would undoubtedly halt his progression to *vir* status and taint him with unmanliness. As a youth, he was like a "respectable Roman matron of a freeborn unmarried girl, desirable but not to be penetrated."

⁶¹ Olson, "Masculinity, Appearance, and Sexuality," 186. Olson uses the term "Romanness" to illustrate that the man, upon assuming the *toga virillis*, had successfully entered public and adult life and can fulfill the associated duties.

attention from males, and not engaging in passive sex.⁶² Performing the active role and the natural role created the moral good and standing necessary to participate in public life as a *vir*.

A Roman *vir* was supposed to be masculine, brave, strong, and a sexually active partner in any relationship, whether with a male or female. To act in any way contrary to this risked the insult of being associated with, or behaving like, a woman (*muliebria pati*); what defined a *vir*, outside of his biological function of reproduction and his social position as a *vir*, was his ability to not be penetrated.⁶³ A man's voice quality, whether he danced or sang, how he walked, or his attention to excessive personal care or hygiene were all under constant observation to make assumptions about his character.⁶⁴ His "lisp[ing] speech, a hand on his hip, scratching his head with one finger, wearing make-up, undergoing depilation, and wearing color could unman someone"; he could be termed a *mollis* or soft man.⁶⁵ The wearing of [excessive] jewelry, using a mirror, or deviating from the wearing of the toga, which was an insult to the state, could harm his

⁶² Richlin, "Not Before Homosexuality," 546-547.

⁶³ Rantala, "Ruling in Purple," 122.

⁶⁴ Charles, "Unmanning an Emperor," 214. Dancing was cast as allowing or desiring penetration. Those who danced as a profession were a class of *infamia* thus they could be penetrated without repercussion.; Rantala, "Ruling in Purple," 122; Maria Beatrice Bittarello, "Otho, Elagabalus and The Judgement of Paris: The Literary Construction of The Unmanly Emperor," In *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne* 37, no. 1 (2011): 93-113, 98. Dancing, luxuriousness, sexual excess, and adultery was dangerous behavior for an adult male.

⁶⁵ Chrysanthos S. Chrysanthou, "Sex and Power in Cassius Dio's Roman History," *Mnemosyne* 74, no. 4 (2020), 598–625: 609. *Mollita* or *mollis*, undermined ones masculinity and was used to denote men who lacked military prowess, endurance, or political authority.; Olson, "Masculinity, Appearance, and Sexuality," 187, 189; A man's hair was associated with his "inner heat" that concocted his sperm, depilation meant and undermining of symbolic privilege of men.; Wardle, "Suetonius and Galba's Taste in Men," 1013. Hairless men were usually depicted as having a desire to be sexually penetrated.; Richlin, "Not Before Homosexuality," 542; Bittarello, "Otho, Elagabalus, and the Judgement of Paris," 95-97; Charles, "Unmanning an Emperor," 203. To be termed *mollis* made one unsuitable for positions of political power.

public status.⁶⁶ An effeminate man is a cross-dresser who uses cosmetics and appears as womanly, or worse, a male prostitute, and, as a result, is cast into a category of the lowest social order.⁶⁷ Unmanly gestures, demeanor, dress, or an effeminate voice all created a gender-ambiguous self-representation that threatened the identity of a *vir*.⁶⁸ A Roman *vir* wanted to avoid the insult of being passive or soft, which was linked to effeminate behavior such as being labeled treacherous, subversive, or feeble, which would undermine his *auctoritas*, or the element that was the basis of his political career.⁶⁹ His physical traits, his physiognomy, was something Romans were particularly focused on, as indicated by Polemon's handbook on physiognomy, in which his character could be determined by looks and masculinity or femininity deduced.⁷⁰ His behavior, as well as his attire, could cause others to have the impression he was not of elite rank (he was not adhering to the customs of high). His dress, as already noted, could lead to beliefs about his sexual preferences and cast him as effeminate, perhaps even of lacking manly strength; one whose clothes were odd or "loose-belted" could lead to him being assumed to have feminine attributes.⁷¹ The effeminate man was associated with political, social, and moral weakness, and his sexual depravity was played up to generate insecurities surrounding masculinity and what kind of man should possess power.⁷² A man's effeminate or luxurious apparel that failed to adequately cover his body properly also revealed a "foulness" of mind, further contributing to a

⁶⁶ Richlin, "Not Before Homosexuality," 544; Latham, "Fabulous Clap-Trap," 105, 109.

⁶⁷ Olson, "Masculinity, Appearance, and Sexuality," 188.

⁶⁸ Chrysanthou, "Sex and Power in Cassius Dio," 612-614.

⁶⁹ Latham, "Fabulous Clap-Trap," 89.

⁷⁰ Rantala, "Ruling in Purple," 125.

⁷¹ Richlin, "Not Before Homosexuality," 542.

⁷² Latham, "Fabulous Clap-Trap," 90.

vir's failure to have self-control.⁷³ Dio uses Cicero to comment on his shock about Caesar's appearance, which did not fit with military prowess or manly strength. Dio writes:

Sulla had looked askance at the looseness of his girdle, so much so that he had wished to kill him, and declared to those who begged him off: "Well, I will grant him to you; but be thoroughly on your guard against this ill-girt fellow." And Cicero could not comprehend it, but even in the moment of defeat said: "I should never have expected one so ill-girt to have conquered Pompey."⁷⁴

A passive male, or an effeminate male, could risk the association and labels of "*pathicus, exoletus, concubinus, spintria, puer* (boy), *pullus, pusio, delicatus* (sweet), *mollis, tener, debilis, effeminatus, discinctus, and morbosus*," though the most common term used to indicate a combination of the above was a *cinaedus*.⁷⁵ Such effeminacy could lead to insults of being a *cinaedus*, which was a male who was penetrated by another male and actively enjoyed it and likely performed oral sex, too.⁷⁶ The *cinaedus* was humiliated by being repeatedly dominated by other men and by his "womanish desire." He was like a nymphomaniac who "dressed to attract men and had sex at the drop of a hat."⁷⁷ There was social misery awaiting any adult passive male who was penetrated, which contained moral condemnations of anal and oral intercourse that formed the base of invective against passive sexuality and also incurred extreme scorn; oral sex was exceptionally detested and equated with a receptive/passive role.⁷⁸ Any association of

⁷³ Olson, "Masculinity, Appearance, and Sexuality," 190.

⁷⁴ Dio, *Roman History*, 43.43.4-5.

⁷⁵ Richlin, "Not Before Homosexuality," 531.

⁷⁶ Butricia, "Some Myths and Anomalies," 223, 250. Cunnilingus was not considered manly at all and was perceived of as a last resort when his real "manhood" had failed.; Richlin, "Not Before Homosexuality," 526.

⁷⁷ Karras, "Active/Passive, Acts/Passion," 1258.

⁷⁸ Flemming, "Sexuality," 806. Performance of oral sex, whether male or female, was seen as disgusting, polluting, and unmanly. It was a misuse of the special part of the body that acted as a

being passive or preferring penetration automatically carried the concept of sexual deviancy and “otherness” with it, as Roman culture was typically not tolerant of the passive male.⁷⁹ There was a social burden and negative identity that a passive male possessed, which applied to him under the concept of *cinaedus*, meaning, he underwent “womanish things” and was a failed *vir*.⁸⁰ Being termed a woman or spoken of as submitting to the female role was one of the worst insults a Roman man could endure, as perceived by elite writers and audiences. His willingness to be penetrated, his abdication of a manly role, and his unrestrained desires made him a figure of infamy.⁸¹ To be consumed by desire was itself emasculating and associated with women and would lead to assumptions about a man's chastity and strength of mind.⁸² His effeminacy meant a depraved slide into “luxurious self-indulgence,” and that luxuriousness associated with excessive lust was seen as responsible for the deep decay in Roman *mores*.⁸³ His willingness to be

“guardian of purity in terms of what goes in and what comes out.”; Sharp, “Incontinentia, Licentia, Et Libido,” 10. For a man to fellate or perform cunnilingus was an egregious misuse of his *os* (mouth), as, for a Roman freeborn man, his mouth was to be used for public speaking, his political office, and was vital to maintain affairs of the state. To make the mouth impure was to misuse the bodily organ most essential to maintaining the state.; Bremert, “Sex in Suetonius,” 85; Richlin, “Not Before Homosexuality,” 528, 534.

⁷⁹ Richlin, “Not before Homosexuality,” 530.

⁸⁰ Flemming, “Sexuality,” 808; Richlin, “Not Before Homosexuality,” 530.

⁸¹ Charles, “Unmanning an Emperor,” 218. The excessive desire for sex with either gender was interpreted as an unmanly pursuit of luxury and “antithetical to the general perception of what constituted manly excellence.”; Karras, “Active/Passive, Acts/Passion,” 1258.

⁸² Jan Meister, “Reports about the “Sex Life” of Early Roman Emperors: A Case of Character Assassination?,” in Martijn Icks and Eric Shiraev, eds., *Character Assassination throughout the Ages* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2014): 59-81; 61. A real man was supposed to dominate his libido and subordinate his sexual desires to *ratio*.; Wardle, “Suetonius and Galba’s Taste in Men,” 1009; De La Bedoyere, “Virtue, Honour, and Chastity,” 21. To be equated with a woman could mean a weak intellect, where men were supposed to be superior in their cleverness. “When a man erred, it was cast as *fecit errorem muliebrem*, to make a womanly error.

⁸³ Charles, “Unmaning an Emperor,” 202; De La Bedoyere, “Virtue, Honour, and Chastity,” 20.

penetrated was *impudicitia*, or unchaste, and perceived as degenerate and especially effeminate in that, while *pudicitia* was strongly associated with women's virtue, it was a violation of proper male identity of purity and self-control, which the Roman elite held as ideal through an emphasis on respectability; "sexual continence was one of the defining factors of Romanness in a man."⁸⁴ Failure to rein in his desires, whether it be for a woman or man, could lead to social disaster.⁸⁵ A man, because of his sexual excesses, which encompassed behavior like having too much sex or passive sex, could neglect his public duty or, through affection of his partner, allow the partner to have too much influence over him and his political decisions.⁸⁶ Though a *cinaedus* was described as a passive male, they are also known to have sexual relationships with women, further adding to their reputation for excessive sexual behavior that dehumanizes them.⁸⁷ Whatever his sexual behavior, it was his inability to control himself, especially in the passive role, that led to the classification of his excessive sexual vigor as effeminate.⁸⁸

Impudicitia (*impudicus*) was also applied to adulterers and other sexual transgressors and bore such a negative connotation, likely linked with status as *infamia*, that Dio, against the tradition of Suetonius, goes out of his way to make Caesar free from the charge of being a *cinaedus* and becoming *impudicus* because of his relationship with Nicomedes. However, he does not shy away from implying Caesar was effeminate later on upon assuming a more

⁸⁴ E. V. Mulhern, "Roman Matrona," *The Classical Journal* 112, no. 4 (2017): 432–59, 455; Mattingly, "Power, Sex, and Empire," 96; Richlin, "Not Before Homosexuality," 531; Flemming, "Sexuality," 812. Moderation and self-mastery were seen as essential in the pursuit of Roman male greatness.

⁸⁵ Peter Walcot, "Plutarch on Sex," *Greece & Rome* 45, no. 2 (1998): 166–87, 178.

⁸⁶ Bremert, "Sex in Suetonius," 26.

⁸⁷ Richlin, "Not Before Homosexuality," 547.

⁸⁸ Meister, "Reports about the Sex Life," 92.

dictatorial role.⁸⁹ Dio, writing about Caesar's willingness to tolerate verbal abuse from his soldiers and possibly commenting on his *clementia*, describes one abuse Caesar could not suffer.

Dio writes:

As for him, however, he was not displeased at their saying this, but was quite delighted that by such frankness toward him they showed their confidence that he would never be angry at it — except in so far as their abuse concerned his intercourse with Nicomedes. At this he was greatly vexed and manifestly pained; he attempted to defend himself, denying the affair upon oath, whereupon he incurred all the more ridicule.⁹⁰

Dio wanted to prevent Caesar from being cast as a *cinaedus* or even a *concupinus* of Nicomedes because Caesar would have been 19 at the time, too old for such a relationship, and cast in the role of enjoying being passive in the relationship; the idea that he was a *puer* could undermine his political stance. Caesar being *infamis* would place him in the lowest ranks of society.⁹¹ Boys who made it to *vir*, or a true Roman freeborn male, were not supposed to be penetrated and were supposed to have an interest in penetrating women.⁹² Caesar would have been a *cinaedus*, and worse than that, he would have been a foreign ruler's sexual object, which could make him unfit for rule or command, which explains Caesar's outrage over the issue.⁹³ Caesar could have been viewed as submitting to the power of another man and taking a womanly role in doing so, which was a source of *pudor* or shame that could be wielded against him by his

⁸⁹ Meister, "Reports about the Sex Life," 60. Losing one's bodily integrity through penetration granted *infamia*, which carried legal repercussions with it.; Richlin, "Not Before Homosexuality," 532. Suetonius describes Caesar as a *cinaedus* in his relationship with Nicomedes, the King of Bithynia.

⁹⁰ Dio, *Roman History*, 43.20.4.

⁹¹ Richlin, "Not Before Homosexuality," 537.

⁹² Richlin, "Not Before Homosexuality," 534.

⁹³ Meister, "Reports about the Sex Life," 95. Sexual misconduct was frequently used as a reason to remove troublesome men and women from power.

political opponents for their gain.⁹⁴ His status as an effeminate man could make him unreliable, and his position as dictator could be socially destabilizing.⁹⁵ Furthermore, the sexual excess attributed to a *cinaedus* or effeminate man meant he lacked self-mastery and self-restraint and could not exercise dominion over his bodily desires, much less over other men. His excess would generate the idea that his sexual activities led him to neglect or perform his public duties incorrectly.⁹⁶ The accusation would also lend to a violation of the law, in which Caesar willingly engaged in a mutual sex crime or *commercio mutui stupri*.⁹⁷ Public opinion also played a role in characterizing the penetrated freeborn man, as they (the public) readily objected and were outraged by it. It can partially explain the interest of elite Roman writers in reporting these things outside of reasons for moralizing narrative constructions.⁹⁸ While it was tolerable for a man to penetrate, especially a boy or slave, the desire to penetrate adult males, especially freeborn, is an anomaly, and pederasty was given as the norm, not the exception. Caesar's sexual activity, as well as the Roman elite's general opinion, was that such sexual submission was equated to a "loss of honor, admission of inferiority, and lack of virility"; to be penetrated was to be dominated and unnatural, and he would have lost his reputation.⁹⁹ He would have been cast as morally weak and failing at masculine self-control while also being lumped in the same category

⁹⁴ Sharp, "Incontinentia, Licentia, Et Libido," 12; Mattingly, "Sex, Power, and Empire," 110.

⁹⁵ De La Bedoyere, "Virtue, Honor, and Chastity," 37.

⁹⁶ Olson, "Masculinity, Appearance, and Sexuality," 185; Bremert, "Sex in Suetonius," 26.

⁹⁷ Richlin, "Not Before Homosexuality," 539.

⁹⁸ Richlin, "Not Before Homosexuality," 533.

⁹⁹ Walters, "Invading the Roman Body," 31. The one who is penetrated is seen as being there solely for the sexual gratification of the penetrator. Whoever was penetrated is viewed as having power wielded over them.; Mattingly, "Sex, Power, and Empire," 110; Richlin, "Not Before Homosexuality," 535.

as adulterers.¹⁰⁰ What made it worse was if Caesar had done this for money or favors, which, by his own *Lex Julia Municipalis* (45 BC), would have caused him to lose his right to vote over selling his body as a male prostitute. This offense would be important to this thesis's discussion of emperors like Elagabalus, who Dio alleges prostituted himself for money.¹⁰¹

A further insult to a Roman *vir* was to be labeled as or associated with a eunuch, the dangerous other who was a non-*vir* or half-man by nature and a gender-subverting degenerate.¹⁰² Castration, implying becoming a eunuch by choice or force, was the act of a non-man who violated the gender binary.¹⁰³ Those who were castrated were cast as unnaturally extended their feminine boyhood appeal, destined for suffering the “indecent” of penetration.¹⁰⁴ Castration meant that they were emasculated and something other than a man; they were deviant and debauched, who, if castrated by choice, were viewed as exceptionally lacking self-control and Roman manliness.¹⁰⁵ The Romans possessed a sense of nature, of what is natural and unnatural, and eunuchs fell into that unnatural category. The Romans worshipped the *paterfamilias* generative power, his *genius*, so much so that the survival of society and family rested on his ability to generate children and infuse the natural world with his fertility.¹⁰⁶ With fertility and generative power at the forefront of societal stability, a eunuch was naturally barred from access

¹⁰⁰ Flemming, “Sexuality,” 808.

¹⁰¹ Flemming, “Sexuality,” 803. Prostitutes, especially those who became a prostitutes as freeborn citizens, forfeited integrity and virtue.; Richlin, “Not Before Homosexuality,” 559.

¹⁰² Rantala, “Ruling in Purple,” 123.

¹⁰³ Rantala, “Ruling in Purple,” 125.

¹⁰⁴ Butricia, “Some Myths and Anomalies,” 233.

¹⁰⁵ Latham, “Fabulous Clap-Trap,” 110, 120; Charles, “Nero and Sporus Again,” 676; Walter Stevenson, “The Rise of Eunuchs in Greco-Roman Antiquity,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5, no. 4 (1995): 495–51, 495.

¹⁰⁶ Stevenson, “The Rise of Eunuchs,” 498.

to power or prestige because of his lack of reproductive ability. Romans feared castration because a eunuch had an ambiguous sexuality; there was confusion surrounding his sexual ability. If castrated during puberty, they were alleged to lose fertility but retain sexual desire and the capability to enjoy sexual pleasure.¹⁰⁷ They could threaten a true *vir* by undermining his household with adultery. The eunuch could be an object of sexual desire for his wife because he could not impregnate her and, therefore, satisfy her sexual desires. They were seen as adulterers and unnatural components of Roman society but also could be perceived as a lustful deviant for men, who would penetrate them as they were deemed effeminate by their sterile nature, perhaps desiring such penetration. Even worse, the eunuch could himself be the penetrator of men, who could be viewed as the “companions for a man with no masculinity” and were sexually submissive themselves.¹⁰⁸ Further characterizations of the eunuch could cast them in elegant dress or a feminine voice, making them unmanly as previously defined, which could threaten Roman masculine values by appearing as a monstrous abomination of a man. It was not just the problem of their sexuality or the confusion over their capability for sex as penetrator or penetrated, but the alarming employment of them in proximity to the emperor, such as Caracalla’s promotion of a eunuch during his reign, which Dio found detestable, or Nero’s castration of Sporus, which indicated his status as an object of sexual penetration.¹⁰⁹ Eunuchs, like Elagabalus considered becoming, were to be banished from the realm of power and associated with prostitutes. There was a deep-seated fear that the eunuch resembled Eastern practices of wealth and excess, which would generate moral and political decline and possibly

¹⁰⁷ Stevenson “The Rise of Eunuchs,” 498.

¹⁰⁸ Bremert, “Sex in Suetonius,” 88.

¹⁰⁹ Butricia, “Some Myths and Anomalies,” 230.

servile status for citizens that would threaten their *libertas*.¹¹⁰ Roman views on sex were male-oriented and phallocentric, where the penis was emphasized as a symbol of power and associated with pride and admiration.¹¹¹ How could a man with no fertility and no generative power lead or influence elite Roman men? His castration had made him alien, cutting away what had made him a Roman man and viewed as an insult to his duty to the state. Though he could still penetrate, his biological function and ability to become a *paterfamilias* was removed.

There were several legal restrictions on male-male sexual activities, such as the *Lex Scantinia*, which penalized free males who were willingly penetrated by applying *infamia* to them, usually at the discretion of censors and praetors.¹¹² Augustus himself went to great lengths, as did Julius Caesar, to address sexual misbehavior and male-male relations, especially within the sanctity of marriage.¹¹³ Laws like the *Lex Julia Adulteriis Coercendis* (18 BC) also prohibited sex with adult freeborn males, showing the deplorability of such same-sex relations. Men who were *infamis*, like prostitutes or actors, were viewed as so tainted that even their money and household utensils were tainted by association. It also indicated that they were *impudicus*, so unchaste that they could be dismissed or lose rights.¹¹⁴ There were legal and civil disabilities heaped upon passive social males. However, most Roman elites relied on familial self-supervision and customs, or social coercion, to enforce good behavior onto the *vir*. If the censors or praetors noticed his sexual passivity or unchaste behavior, he could be struck off the

¹¹⁰ Latham, “Fabulous Clap-Trap,” 91.

¹¹¹ Mattingly, “Power, Sex, and Empire,” 106.

¹¹² Richlin, “Not Before Homosexuality,” 530.

¹¹³ Shea, Lillian Shea, “An Augustan Accident: The Paradox of Augustan Sex and Marriage Laws and Augustan Ideology,” *The Gettysburg Historical Journal* 19 (September 2020): 108–129, 108; Mattingly, “Power, Sex, and Empire,” 118.

¹¹⁴ Richlin, “Not Before Homosexuality,” 540.

list of senatorial ranking *vir* and lose his male privileges or the right to vote, which was derived from his good moral standing.¹¹⁵ He was no longer a whole *vir* and could lose his office, his role in the senate, his place in the equestrian order, or his role in the Tribal Assembly.¹¹⁶ His *infamia* would cause him to be placed with the actors, pimps, prostitutes, gladiators, and others whose *infamia* accorded them the lowest social status. Their foul, womanish actions and penetrability degenerated their manhood and what characterized a Roman *vir*. To be “buggered” itself was a *crimen* in a freeborn Roman man, and this act could not be imposed on a citizen “honorably or legally”.¹¹⁷ His sexual passivity barred him from office and his ability to participate in court. If it became a matter of public concern, the passive male could be fined half his goods as well.¹¹⁸ Sexual deviance, passivity, and immorality were punishable by the state, further cementing concepts of morality and immorality.¹¹⁹ An excellent example of the legal idea of a passive male and its negative connotations can be explained in the punishment of an adultering male, who, if caught, could be killed for his actions. Though death was not the only option, a wronged husband or father could submit the male adulterer to anal rape, oral rape, or even gang rape with his slaves involved, subjecting the adultering male to the worst form of humiliation, being a passive *vir* and having a slave perform the action, someone of low status.¹²⁰ This is not usually what happened, more of a violent sexual fantastical punishment. Still, it demonstrates that to be

¹¹⁵ Shea, “An Augustan Accident,” 112. The chastity of citizens was directly related to the overall welfare of the state. Uncontrolled sexual behavior threatened the moral fabric of Rome.; Sharp, “Incontinentia, Licentia, Et Libido,” 8.

¹¹⁶ Richlin, “Not Before Homosexuality,” 556.

¹¹⁷ Butricia, “Some Myths and Anomalies,” 210–213. Butricia uses the English (UK) term “buggered” in place of “anal sex.”

¹¹⁸ Richlin, “Not Before Homosexuality,” 566.

¹¹⁹ Shea, “An Augustan Accident,” 111.

¹²⁰ Mattingly, “Power, Sex, and Empire,” 112.

penetrated, under law, had a significant loss of status and could be seen as a punishment. The social degradation of an adulterer who “asserted his manhood sexually at the expense of another man” was seen as equal to the killing of an adulterer. His punishment would diminish his status as *vir*.¹²¹ Anything denoting a feminine role in men generated hostile attitudes and subversive sexual behavior, undermining the socio-political hierarchy of acceptable sexual liaisons.¹²² Essential values associated with a man’s masculinity were his *virtus*, manly strength or virtue that was associated with courage, valor, and excellence, and *imperium*, which was the dominating role of a proper Roman male and his ability to keep control over relationships with non-*vir* and women.¹²³ A true *vir* had the right to hold power over his wife, children, household, and lesser men and must do so with respectable behavior.¹²⁴ His entire being and authority rested on his *virtus* and proper display of masculine qualities.¹²⁵ He was to maintain the appearance of propriety at all times and possess “discipline, bravery, tenacity, and frugality, all of which made him a morally sound *vir*. Violating these principles negatively impacted Roman society's patriarchal nature and carried tremendous weight on public and social life. An elite man should fulfill his biological function, his social role, and not engage in sexual behavior that could be criticized, such as being penetrated.

II. Sex and Tyranny: The Malus Princeps

This is the main characteristic of high status, that it allows nothing to be hidden from view; and in the case of emperors it opens not only their houses but even their bedrooms and most intimate retreats, and it reveals and displays every secret

¹²¹ Walters, “Invading the Roman Body,” 39.

¹²² Rantala, “Ruling in Purple,” 124.

¹²³ Rantala, “Ruling in Purple,” 125.

¹²⁴ Bremert, “Sex in Suetonius,” 84.

¹²⁵ Bremert, “Sex in Suetonius,” 24.

for rumor to learn. [...] For many famous men were put to shame because they married a wife without proper consideration or kept her too long due to indulgence. In this way, their disgrace deriving from family matters destroyed their public and political reputation, and their unsuccessful role as husbands prevented them from being regarded as the best among the citizens (Plin. Pan. 83.1 and 4).¹²⁶

The quote from Pliny provides a unique insight into the attitudes of Roman historians towards an emperor's sexual behavior and its importance in the overall reign of an emperor. While adultery is only one form of transgression and a criminal one, the idea that emperors should be observed in an intimate part of their lives to derive their character and ability is important. Sexual transgressions, incest, adultery, and the abuse of women frequently appear throughout Roman historiography in describing the activities of a *malus princeps*.¹²⁷ The sexual aspects of an emperor's reign could be widely criticized as they are measures by which an emperor can be evaluated to suggest the direction his principate would take and often preceded devastating events in Rome itself, such as Nero's marriage to Sporus and Pythagoras preceding the burning of Rome. In the accounts of Suetonius, Tacitus, and Dio, there is a notable cycle of dynastic rise, decline, and fall that often includes lurid tales of sexual excesses that culminate in

¹²⁶ Annemarie Ambühl, "The Flavians and Their Women: Rewriting Neronian Transgressions?" in *Flavian Responses to Nero's Rome*, edited by Mark Heerink and Esther Meijer, 55–86 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 56.

¹²⁷ Caillan Davenport, "The Sexual Habits of Caracalla: Rumour, Gossip, and Historiography." *Histos: The On-line Journal of Ancient Historiography* 11 (2017): 75-100, 91. The charge of debauching women or children is frequently levelled at bad emperors.; C. T. Mallan, "The Rape of Lucretia in Cassius Dio's 'Roman History.'" *The Classical Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (2014): 758–71, 764. "Dio often depicts women as victims of individuals he wanted to portray as abusing political power."; Ambühl, "The Flavians and Their Women," 61; Holt N. Parker, "Why Were the Vestals Virgins? Or the Chastity of Women and the Safety of the Roman State," *The American Journal of Philology* 125, no. 4 (2004): 563–601, 583. The charge of *incestum* could be incest but was often much more than that. It was an illicit sexual act that was also sacrilegious, such as the violation of a Vestal Virgin. It represented an endangerment of the state.

the worst members of each dynasty. Aristotle (384-322 BC), Xenophon (430-355 BC), Plato (427-348 BC), Livy (59 BC-A.D. 17), Pliny (A.D. 23- A.D. 79), and Plutarch (A.D. 46-A.D. 119) all use sex to indicate the tyrannical lifestyle of a ruler.¹²⁸ The tyrant engages in all the tropes of the literary despot, such as sexual excess, suspicion, and cruelty.¹²⁹ While there are many stereotypical categories that an ancient tyrant falls into, sexual deviancy is the “strongest *exemplum*” of his bad nature.¹³⁰ From wife-stealing, adultery, passivity, rampant pederasty with freeborn youths, incest, and gender transgressions, Roman historians frequently painted a picture of what behavior separated the good from the bad using sex as a standard measure in the tyrant *topos*.¹³¹ The emperor’s lack of restraint in his sexual activity led to the eroding of his humanity until there was nothing human left.¹³² His lack of sexual restraint was an indictment of his reign as his desires ran rampant across the boundaries of private life and into his public actions, such as Caligula’s favoritism toward his sister, Drusilla, and her husband.¹³³

For a historian, “tales of sex established the criteria for what an emperor should or should not be.”¹³⁴ Those tales linked emperors' bad behavior to the ruination of cities, morals, and

¹²⁸ Gottfried Mader, “History as Carnival, or Method and Madness in the *Vita Heliogabali*,” *Classical Antiquity* 24, no. 1 (2005): 131–72, 142.

¹²⁹ Mader, “History as Carnival,” 168.

¹³⁰ Bremert, “Sex in Suetonius,” 33.

¹³¹ Dio, *Roman History*, 59.11.1; Bremert, “Sex in Suetonius,” 23; C. M. C. Green, “Claudius, Kingship, and Incest,” *Latomus* 57, no. 4 (1998): 765–9: 766, 768. Incestuous behavior by an emperor contravened the law and the Roman *mos maiorum*. It would cast the shadow of moral censure over and regular man, and, in the case of Claudius, he manipulated the law to avoid such a charge.; Mader, “History as Carnival,” 135.

¹³² Bill Gladill, “Tiberius on Capri and the Limits of Roman Sex Culture,” *Revue EuGeStA*, no. 8 (2018); 184-202, 199.

¹³³ Wardle, “Suetonius and Galba’s Taste in Men,” 1006.

¹³⁴ Kemezis, “The Fall of Elagabalus as a Literary Narrative,” 349.

people, and the image of a tyrant is frequently evoked to remind readers of a disastrous reign.¹³⁵ The first example in Dio, like any other Roman historian, is the rape of Lucretia by Sextus Tarquinius, which caused the immediate downfall of the Roman kingship. Another example is Appius Claudius attempted kidnapping and rape of Verginia, which resulted in the downfall of the *decemviri*.¹³⁶ Nero is also a good example as, during his reign, Rome almost lost all of Britain while he was indulging himself in his vices. Using their hindsight, they constructed narratives through internal parallels or cross-references that connect one bad ruler in his debauchery to another, much like Dio connects Nero to Commodus during the burning of Rome in each ruler's reign. Not only does gender transgression or sexual deviance precede disaster, but it usually precedes the assassination of an emperor.¹³⁷ Not only were the deviant emperors killed, but many even had their genitals attacked for their sexual transgressions or were killed with their genitals exposed, indicating the personal and aggrieved nature of the conspirators and the unmanly actions of the ruler causing his manhood to be targeted.¹³⁸ The emperor's sexual activities generated so much hatred that the body parts that enabled such evil could be attacked upon his overthrow.

¹³⁵ Matthew Nicholls, "Galen and the Last Days of Commodus," In *Galen's Treatise Περὶ Ἀλμπίας (De Indolentia) in Context: A Tale of Resilience*, edited by Caroline Petit, 245–62 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 257, 260; Mallan, "The Rape of Lucretia," 759. Sexual violence works as a trigger for political change.

¹³⁶ Dio, *Roman History*, Zonaras 7.18.

¹³⁷ Eric R. Varner, "Transcending Gender: Assimilation, Identity, and Roman Imperial Portraits," *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome. Supplementary Volumes 7* (2008): 185–205, 200; Chrysanthou, "Sex and Power," 617. "Outrageous transgressions of gender, biological, social, and natural boundaries provide grounds for conspiracies."

¹³⁸ Laura Betzig, "Suffodit Inguina: Genital Attacks on Roman Emperors and Other Primates," *Politics and the Life Sciences* 33, no. 1 (2014): 54–68, 55.

There is an implied notion that a bad emperor surpasses the previous in the ideological trajectory of tyranny or one tyrant giving way to another, except for the “five good emperors.”¹³⁹ One evil emperor is simply the heir to the tyranny of the last. In some cases, during the narrative that emperor continues or amplifies specific behaviors of the previous. Furthermore, for Dio, the theme in his writing is that human nature remains constant, and if an emperor is terrible, he must exhibit bad sexual behavior like the others. It is part of his agenda to portray an emperor as bad in which he must condemn odd behavior, typically sexual or unmanly, unchaste, and undermining his status as a *vir*; without moderation or self-control necessary for his authority, he became an evil tyrant.¹⁴⁰ While there is no good way of knowing what rumors of sexual behavior of an emperor are true, it is important to discuss them, just as one would with Suetonius, to discover Dio’s historiographical method, which uses such action to amplify a negative stance on an emperor’s rule. It is not virtues that Dio is obsessed with in his portrayals of emperors, though it is present, but vices and their reactions or consequences.¹⁴¹ Of utmost concern is the way the emperors become feminized through their vices or lack of self-control, destroying their character further by using the *topos* of the tyrant as doing womanly things, such as prostitution, wig wearing, dancing, lyre playing, and more that are the basis of many stories in Suetonius and

¹³⁹ Mader, “History as Carnival,” 140.

¹⁴⁰ Mallan, “The Rape of Lucretia,” 766. A lack of self-control and chastity paired with an interest in the emperor’s sex life serves to demonstrate the degree to which ideas of *pudicitia* and *sophrosyne* were still entrenched in the political discourse of power in the 3rd century.; Davenport, “The Sexual Habits of Caracalla,” 93. Demonstrating that an individual lacked continence was part of Dio’s “strategy of denigrating the emperor.”

¹⁴¹ Luke Pitcher, “Cassius Dio,” In *Characterization in Ancient Greek Literature: Studies in Ancient Greek Narrative*, vol. 4, edited by Koen De Temmerman and Evert van Emde Boas, 221–35 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 221, 224.

Tacitus.¹⁴² The tyrant fails as an emperor and a man; he lacks self-control and the ability to maintain his power over himself and his subjects. It was a scorn to the people of Rome to be domineered over by an effeminate man.¹⁴³ If his insatiable *libido* cannot be controlled, he began to resemble something other than Roman, usually an eastern monarch with sexual passivity undermining his character, which was incompatible with the idea of a tough and robust masculine Roman man; the emasculated man is a tyrant archetype.¹⁴⁴ Any emperor who was submissive was no better than a slave and was made unfit for duty; the repeated degradation of their own body corrupted their rule. A feminized emperor “disrupted gender and socio-political order and threatened the stability of the empire and its moral standards.”¹⁴⁵

The Romans under the Principate lived in a world where sexual transgressions motivated conspiracies, and the emperor's bad behavior created the impression that political reality was suspended by his behavior, giving rise to social decay or instability.¹⁴⁶ For the Roman historian, the emperor was an “agent whose personal qualities were responsible for the course of political

¹⁴² Charles, “Unmanning an Emperor,” 201-202. Uncontrollable *libido* is a hallmark of tyrannical behavior and *luxuria*.; Rantala, “Ruling in Purple,” 125-126; Bittarello, “Otho, Elagabalus, and the Judgement of Paris,” 98, 106. Allegations of effeminacy denied one’s political opponent to be good members of the ruling class because of their passivity. Sexual passivity was a rejection of the male warrior ethos.

¹⁴³ De La Bedoyere, “Virtue, Honor, and Chastity,” 20.

¹⁴⁴ Bremert, “Sex in Suetonius,” 33.

¹⁴⁵ Chrysanthou, “Sex and Power,” 602; Jussi Rantala, “Call me not Lord for I am a Lady-Emperor Elagabalus and the Problem of Gender in the History of Cassius Dio,” in *Language and the Scientific Imagination: Proceedings of the 11th Conference of the International Society for the Study of European Ideas (ISSEI), 28 July - 2 August 2008*, edited G. Bottà and M. Härmänmaa, 1-12 (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2010), 7. The emperor was supposed to promote an idea of continuity, harmony, fertility, and a proper relationship between genders, which was undermined by his behavior if he was a bad emperor.

¹⁴⁶ Kemezis, “The Fall of Elagabalus as a Literary Narrative,” 350, 355.

events.”¹⁴⁷ His luxurious and debauched activity could lead him into the company of wicked companions, with whom he is alleged to have sexual relations, such as Elagabalus and Zoticus, and cause him to err in his judgments, creating administrative problems and moral disgrace; the emperor's licentiousness made him fail in performing the duties of his office. The emperor's sexual preferences and excessive sex with a favorite subject made him corrupt and caused him to promote undeserving men, who would then exercise influence over him by proximity. In the accounts of several of the “bad” emperors' reigns, like Elagabalus, this seems to be precisely what happens: an inverted world where low-status freedmen or slaves dominate the emperor sexually and gain great power as a result, which diminishes the power of the princeps and his status. It was the emperor's duty to answer the petitions of his subjects and seek advice/work with the senate. If his monstrous luxuriousness and self-indulgence prevented that, he was a failure. Chrysanthos Chrysanthou provides a guideline to how this practice manifested itself throughout Dio's narrative by stating that there was “outrage amongst the Roman elite by sexual transgressions, that the emperor's sex life was associated with neglect of his duties, and that sex and politics interrelated in the emperor's practice of bestowing offices upon amours and his sexual habits made their careers.”¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, his relationships with low-status individuals whom he promoted to power generated opposition from the elite and became viewed as sexual favors; otherwise, there was little explanation for how such men could replace the senators in his court.¹⁴⁹ The relationship worked both ways. Either an emperor resembled his low-life

¹⁴⁷ Kemezis, “The Fall of Elagabalus as a Literary Narrative,” 382.

¹⁴⁸ Chrysanthou, “Sex and Power,” 605.

¹⁴⁹ Olivier Hekster, “Emperors and Councillors: Imperial Representation between Republic and Empire,” in *New Perspectives on Power and Political Representation from Ancient History to*

associates, or they resembled him.¹⁵⁰ In Dio's *Roman History*, the drift of a ruler into despotism contains a theme of corrupt favorites, sexually connected to the emperor, usurping or misusing the power of the *princeps*¹⁵¹. His sexual excess, indulgence, or passivity in the bedroom is interpreted as failing or kowtowing in other aspects of his administration, and it could even be the reason for his military failures, such as Dio's attribution of Domitian's failures in Dacia to indulging himself in lewdness while his men campaigned.¹⁵²

It is not just enslavement to lowlife advisors that impacted the emperor's rein but also his enslavement to women. In a different form of inverted society, the emperor's mistress or wife took her role for granted and undermined his power, as Messalina did during Claudius's reign. While she engages in adulterous fairs and the selling of public offices, Claudius is blissfully unaware, while the rest of the elite are alarmed at the rapid rate at which his wife is undermining political life. In this world, his submission to women meant that law and religion were displaced by his self-interest and indulgence in vices or his coward-like nature.¹⁵³ The failure to reign in the wanton behavior of one's wife signified a weak emperor who was incapable of demanding or deserving respect. His failure to control his family, especially his wife, made women a threat to the state. He was perceived as devoid of masculine authority, or worse, he was effeminate and

the Present Day: Repertoires of Representation, edited by Harm Kaal and Daniëlle Sloopjes, 11–25 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 16-17; Richlin, "Not Before Homosexuality," 535. The emperor being dominated sexually was an admission of his inferiority.; Meister, "Reports about the Sex Life," 66. Political decisions of an unpopular ruler were viewed as dictated by his passions and affairs with the members of his court because the senate, or the Roman elite, were irritated with having to cultivate relationships with them.

¹⁵⁰ Mader, "History as Carnival," 145.

¹⁵¹ Mader, "History as Carnival," 140.

¹⁵² Dio, *Roman History*, 67.6.3; Bittarello, "Otho, Elagabalus, and the Judgement of Paris," 98. Luxuriousness and sexual excess lead to "cowardice, timidity, laziness, and self-indulgence."

¹⁵³ Green, "Claudius," 766.

had no authority.¹⁵⁴ His submission was seen as detrimental to the state due to the corruption of its leading men by the wiles of women.¹⁵⁵ A bad emperor's failure to reign in his wife cast a shadow over his reign, especially if she was adulterous, and he did not cast her out. Weak emperors empowered or generated morally weak women whose political control, when exercised, was disastrous or caused the emperor shame.¹⁵⁶

Dio is unique in that he wrote about the emperors he lived under, claiming the ability to have witnessed their bad behavior firsthand and making the narrative more compelling by relaying contemporary rumors or observations about each emperor's vices while illustrating the connections between sexual deviancy and imperial power that existed during the Principate.¹⁵⁷ It is one of the main reasons this thesis seeks to explain the sexual nature of each emperor as it relates to the consequences of each reign or the elite's disdain for Commodus, Caracalla, and Elagabalus expressed through his writing. The goal is to connect the narrative to more than a historiographical trend of recollecting tyrannical behaviors that fit the traditional tyrannical *topos*. How does one explain the behavior outside of just being generally bad? Bad behavior is linked to actual crimes, gender transgressions, and public indecency through the orgiastic and adulterous behavior of Tiberius and his arbitrariness with the senate, Caligula's incest and adulterous behavior as assaults on the state, Claudius's incestuous behavior and submission to the adulterous Messalina as upending the Roman world, Nero's deranged marriages and passive

¹⁵⁴ De La Bedoyere, "Virtue, Honor, and Chastity," 18, 20.

¹⁵⁵ Mulhern, "Roman Matrona," 456.

¹⁵⁶ Robert L. Cleve, "Some Male Relatives of the Severan Women," *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 37, no. 2 (1988): 196–206, 203.

¹⁵⁷ Meister, "Reports about the Sex Life," 70. I use the term rumors because Meister points out that senators were largely discontent in having to court the favor of the princeps, so the character flaws of emperors were amplified or made up to explain their political reality.

behavior to his assassination, and Domitian incestuous relationships and violation of a vestal virgin as a continuation of Nero's reign.¹⁵⁸ It also provides the connection between Commodus's debauched behavior and his failure, Caracalla's sexual crimes to his impotence, and Elagabalus's sexual transgressions as the culmination of all the bad emperors before him and the deserved disgust he received as a result. Dio's link of their sexual transgressions to the portrayal of their downfall served to reinforce his senatorial opinion that the monarchy must exist but that the Roman elite must correct it with their removal, even if the senators themselves were not the correctors; "chaotic tyranny must be trumped by righteous good order."¹⁵⁹ For Dio, the sexual narrative revealed important details of the character of emperors and was sufficient to assess their adequacy to rule; sexual activity is a significant component of his imperial portraits. This thesis also seeks to argue against Kemezis' claim that the emperor's bad deeds were "useless as historical data, but rich in entertainment value" by elaborating on what the deeds reflected or meant about the emperor and the impression meant to be drawn by the audience. It does not matter if the deed was not "real." What matters is that it was recorded with a specific purpose, even if just invective, and that an ancient audience would know why the deed was horrific. The narrative must include behavior because it shows something about the emperor as a person, something that an audience can use to understand why a ruler is bad outside of his legal actions.¹⁶⁰ The princeps had a definable sexual identity, a set of preferences that historians

¹⁵⁸ Mary Beard, "The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 70 (1980): 12–27: 12. Sexual violation of the Vestals could upset the *pax deorum* and harm Rome's relationship with the deity. Abuse of the Vestals was viewed as an assault on the state itself.; Charles, "Unmanning an Emperor," 217. Orgiastic behavior was unbecoming of a real Roman man and was seen as an excessive sexual encounter, whether with men or women.

¹⁵⁹ Kemezis, "The Fall of Elagabalus as Literary Narrative," 349, 384.

¹⁶⁰ Pitcher, "Cassius Dio," 22.

approve or disapprove of using language or actions the readers could understand.¹⁶¹ For Dio, the monstrous tyrant is not only “enslaved to ungovernable passions and an enemy to virtue” but erodes the fabric of society through his lawlessness and erodes the dignity of the senate, the Roman elite.¹⁶² Dio takes part in an intellectual discourse on gender, masculinity, and femininity and how the emperor transgresses the strict social lines established in section one.¹⁶³

III. Roman Women: Vestal Virgins, Mistresses, and Wives

Of the literary sources that provide what we know about women, such as poems, historical accounts, declamations, and the Roman *Digest*, most present them in relation to the men in their lives, their husbands or fathers, and deprive them of agency. This portion of chapter one seeks to explain the role of women and their sexual behavior within narratives to provide a basis for claims about imperial women or actions that women suffered in later discussions of the emperors, mainly Claudius. In Dio, Lucretia and Livia are two notable *exemplum* of good Roman women who have the best expression of matronly virtues of decency, honesty, and modesty. Lucretia is a positive *exemplum* as she did not engage in gossip, drinking, or unchaste behaviors but worked her wool in the presence of “bad” women before her assault by Sextus.¹⁶⁴ She embodied the faithful and true Roman matron, and Dio uses her as a literary foil to assert that the violation of such a noble woman could only lead to violent political change. Dio uses Livia to

¹⁶¹ Richlin, “Not Before Homosexuality,” 532.

¹⁶² Nicholls, “Galen and the Last Days of Commodus,” 245; Mallan, “The Rape of Lucretia,” 767. Dio frequently judged the legitimacy of a regime by the ethical quality of the ruler and aforementioned legitimacy being mediated with the ruler's interaction with the elite.

¹⁶³ Rantala, “Ruling in Purple,” 119.

¹⁶⁴ Dio, *Roman History*, 2.11.13-18; Chrysanthou, “Sex and Power,” 614. Wool-working was seen as a noble pursuit for a Roman matron.; Mallan, “The Rape of Lucretia,” 763. There is a traditional image of the ideal wife as a woolworker.

embody a different type of womanly virtue, submission, respect for her husband, and gaining influence by her just behavior. Dio writes of Livia that:

When someone asked her how and by what course of action she had obtained such a commanding influence over Augustus, she answered that it was by being scrupulously chaste herself, doing gladly whatever pleased him, not meddling with any of his affairs, and, in particular, by pretending neither to hear nor to notice the favorites of his passion.¹⁶⁵

Bad women, in contrast to these positive *exempla*, are characterized by their vanity, such as an interest in exotic clothing and attention to haircare, or their negative traits, such as softness, lack of self-control, and lechery.¹⁶⁶ A proper Roman woman was a matron, a man's wife who bore him children and possessed fidelity to her husband; she existed to bear children and act as the moral counterpart to her husband. Any disruption of this, especially through the rape of a freeborn woman, was viewed as one of the worst crimes and sacrilegious.¹⁶⁷ Marriage was the norm for freeborn women; those who were not so lucky, such as slaves or freedwomen, tended to be prostitutes, actors, dancers, or musicians, or if they were privileged, they could be a wetnurse or child sitter. The *materfamilias*, the proper matron, was well respected and should not suffer to be defiled. The rape of a *materfamilias* was subject to capital punishment. An adulterous woman, the opposite of a good matron, was to be punished, whether it was by exile or execution. Roman elite society demanded respectability from a Roman woman. Her chastity and virtue, or her

¹⁶⁵ Dio, *Roman History*, 58.2.5.

¹⁶⁶ Gillian Clark, "Roman Women," *Greece & Rome* 28, no. 2 (1981): 193–212, 197. "Women and their vain actions."; Varner, "Transcending Gender," 200; Rantala, "Ruling in Purple," 125; Richlin, "Not Before Homosexuality," 534, 564. According to Catullus, a Roman wife should let her husband do as he pleases to her.; Walcot, "Plutarch on Sex," 174. Women and sex appear coupled with foolish talk, licentiousness, sloth, failure to take exercise, too many baths, or a gluttonous appetite; Flemming, "Sexuality," 807. Women were assumed to be of loose morals.

¹⁶⁷ Beard, "The Sexual Status of the Vestal Virgins," 14.

virginity and modesty, was required of an aristocratic bride.¹⁶⁸ The protection of marriage and its female role was of utmost importance to the stability of elite society. The monitoring of her behavior and ensuring she engaged in intercourse only with her husband was a source of anxiety; she did not have the freedom of extramarital affairs that *viri* possessed, and any relationship outside of her marriage threatened the existing hierarchy of male over female. A woman's autonomous sexual decisions or affairs were not tolerated.¹⁶⁹ Whereas a man might not lose his reputation from extra-marital sex, a woman's desire was immoderate and lustful; she was undermining the authority of the men in her life. Her nature, a susceptibility to temptation and depravity, enabled her to do wrong if there was no proper male oversight.¹⁷⁰

Why was there attention to the behavior of women and ensuring the sanctity of her marriage? For the Romans, feminine virtue was a sign of the moral health of the commonwealth, and adultery in wives or violation of the Vestal Virgins' virginity, who were on par with elite Roman matrons, were a monstrous danger to the state. In their societal roles, women embodied the state's safety, and maintaining control over the fragile sex was seen as maintaining control

¹⁶⁸ Mattingly, "Power, Sex, and Empire," 97; Clark, "Roman Women," 200. Roman elite married young to ensure the "undefiled body and mind of the bride, they had to catch them young to ensure this."; Dio, *Roman History*, 56.3.3. "For is there anything better than a wife who is chaste, domestic, a good house-keeper, a rearer of children; one to gladden you in health, to tend you in sickness; to be your partner in good fortune, to console you in misfortune; to restrain the mad passion of youth and to temper the unseasonable harshness of old age?"

¹⁶⁹ Evans-Grubbs, "Marriage More Shameful than Adultery," 113; Mulhern, "Roman Matrona," 433. A good Roman man loves a "virtuous Roman woman because she embodies Roman virtues and, by extension, Roma herself." According to Lucan, she should be chaste, devoted to her husband, and marry to bear children for the state.; Shea, "An Augustan Accident," 110. The anxiety surrounding the adulterous nature of women is even present in the laws sponsored by Augustus, the *Lex Julia de Maritandis Ordinibus*, *Lex Julia de Adulteriis*, and the *Lex Papia-Poppaea*, were all partially targeted at women.

¹⁷⁰ De La Bedoyere, "Virtue, Honour, and Chastity," 18.

over the Roman world.¹⁷¹ A woman's chastity or a freeborn girl's virginity was a symbol of the inviolability of Rome; it was a guarantee of the health of Roman society. Her purity and chastity were essential to the honor of her family, and she had to be protected from herself or her lustful desires inherent in her feminine weakness, or she would become a whore or adulteress.¹⁷² Her ability to generate ruin for her family was only important in her relationship with the man in her life, it was his reputation that was damaged worse than hers as he was viewed as having no control over his household; her behavior was cast as a refusal to be subject to her husband.¹⁷³ Failure to control his household meant that, because women were fragile and fickle, they would take over if not in their proper place, so men had to restrain their license.¹⁷⁴ Any crime, such as adultery, that she performed was considered disloyalty to the family and state; thereby she became a traitorous witch. In a crisis, adultery or lecherous behavior by women manifested itself to present a danger to the state. A woman escaping control was a common theme in times of crisis. Whether women had committed unchaste acts was irrelevant as women could be either the effect or origin of the crisis. Women became the target when society was in trouble because Romans, at their core, feared women as a polluter of the family and society. Even Livia was not

¹⁷¹ Parker, "Why were the Vestals Virgins?" 564.

¹⁷² Papakonstantinou, "Raptus and Roman Law," 25. Adultery was a serious form of *stuprum* that affected wives harshly as their infidelity risked damaging the purity of a familial bloodline.; Parker, "Why were the Vestals Virgins?" 569.

¹⁷³ Dio, *Roman History*, 58.2.5, Livia commanded a positive influence over her husband by not meddling in his affairs.; De La Bedoyere, "Virtue, Honour, and Chastity," 22. Any woman who possessed *constantia*, *fides*, and *pudicitia* added to her husband's distinction, but a woman who lacked these had the reverse effect.

¹⁷⁴ Clark, "Roman Women," 206; Saller, "Familia, Domus, and the Roman Conception of the Family," 338, 353. Wives were a vital member of the family and a basic unit of reproduction. To violate the sanctity of the household, which was embodied by its female members, was polluting and harmed the virtue of family members.

immune to such a charge as, when a succession crisis brewed for Augustus due to the death of his heirs, Livia was rumored to have been the cause. Dio writes, “His death (Gaius) was due to a sudden illness. In connection with both deaths (Gaius and Lucius), therefore, suspicion attached to Livia, and particularly because it was just at this time that Tiberius returned to Rome from Rhodes.”¹⁷⁵ Livia, though receiving commendation for her behavior later in the narrative, is cast as a contributing factor to the crisis, and it was possibly believable because Roman women were thought to rely on their son's achievement or position to gain status otherwise impossible for themselves.¹⁷⁶

For something to have gone wrong, women must be near the center of the problem or be enabled by the crisis to exhibit their lack of self-control, lechery, or sexual wiles over men, which causes them to neglect their duties.¹⁷⁷ Women “acting in consort with adulterers or outsiders like slaves were the typical dressings of a crisis,” and society had to turn on the elements that threatened social stability.¹⁷⁸ This is also a popular narrative for the imperial women, such as Agrippina and Messalina, who are deemed promiscuous and immoral schemers, which imperils the *libertas* of the Roman male by subjecting him to female despotism and effeminate tyranny.¹⁷⁹ While it may seem that the woman is the villain of these crises or events, it is usually a construction by men to say something about the men behind the women, not the women themselves. Therefore, the bad actions of women, as presented in this thesis primarily in

¹⁷⁵ Dio, *Roman History*, 55.10a.10.

¹⁷⁶ Clark, “Roman Women,” 205.

¹⁷⁷ Walcot, “Plutarch on Sex,” 176; Flemming, “Sexuality,” 810. Adulterous women or licentious women were symbolic of deeper political and social malaise.

¹⁷⁸ Parker, “Why were the Vestals Virgins?,” 592.

¹⁷⁹ De La Bedoyere, “Virtue, Honour, and Chastity,” 20; Mulhern, “Roman Matrona,” 454.

the discussion of Claudius' reign, mainly serve to demonstrate a weak man.¹⁸⁰ It is primarily because Dio frequently discusses bad women to as part of his exposition of bad emperors and other men that this discussion is necessary. He accounts of emperors like Claudius, Nero, and Elagabalus all attend closely to the women in their lives who usurped their power as *princeps* to some degree. By establishing what a good woman and a bad woman are, their characteristics, and their sexual behaviors, it becomes easier to conclude how their behavior affects the ruler or reflects his poor reign.

IV. Conclusion

Before beginning the commentary on the “bad” emperors selected from Dio’s *Roman History*, a brief overview of the nuances in sexual behavior is proactive. For the Roman *vir*, the true man, it is necessary to possess self-control and chastity, to not engage in effeminate activities, and never to be penetrated under any circumstances. To be a sexual deviant could mean the loss of control and respect from your household, losing his status as a *vir*, being unable to vote or make a will, and, if he was an adulterer, being killed or suffering a fate possibly worse than death. He had to maintain his respectability at all costs, be hypervigilant over his behaviors and attire, and protect himself against abuse directed towards him. To have his manhood undermined would bring catastrophic ruin. He should maintain the proper boundaries of sexual interactions by always being the penetrator and directing his sexual desires to the appropriate targets: his wife, prostitutes, non-citizens, and slaves, especially slave boys. Operating outside of the strict sexual categories that defined the social hierarchy in an unnatural way, such as being penetrated by another man or, worse, his slaves or freedmen, he could be termed a *cinaedus*, and

¹⁸⁰ Walters, “Invading the Roman Body,” 32.

forfeit his manly nature in favor of degeneracy and unrestrained, unnatural lusts. His associations with eunuchs, or becoming one himself, also affected his character, and he may be seen as unfit for political life. A *vir*'s decision-making ability, his right to citizenship, and his ability to perform any public duty was immediately diminished should he engage in unmanly activities, be cast as effeminate, let his paramours rule over him, or keep bad company with lowlifes who were sexually deviant themselves.

Sexual deviancy and lust are also vital to the tyrant's behavior. A bad emperor is associated with his sexual passivity, adultery, pederasty with freeborn youths, and making a mockery of the gender boundaries the elite valued and structured Roman society on. Should he undermine his status as *princeps* and *vir*, he was deemed unfit for rule, his decision-making, administrative acts, promotion of men to offices, and ability to lead were all immediately questioned. His immediate removal was necessitated and justified. He had to be the best of men, represent true Roman manliness in being chaste, restrained, impenetrable, a strong *paterfamilias* or a model *Pater Patriae*, and do nothing unbecoming of his office. He had to restrain his wife, maintain order over his family, prevent moral decay, and be the model that elite Roman men should emulate. Anything less, or any emasculating behavior through lack of self-control, lust, and deviancy, like adultery or sexual passivity, could lead to his removal and be a chief source of his removal.

For Roman women, as much as men depicted them to comment on social decay or demonstrate the emperor's or their husband's failures, they also had to remain within the respectable boundaries that held the social fabric of Rome together. She should engage only in marital sex, bear children, not undermine her husband, and serve as a pillar of virtue for her household and community. To be violated, willingly or unwillingly, carried immense

repercussions, and any perceived fault in her behavior or sex life could ruin her image and that of her husband. She needed to be above gossip and accusations or risk becoming the cause of some scandal or crisis. A faithful Roman wife should be the counterpart of her husband and enhance his prestige. Otherwise, she was a cause for his ruin or poor reception to the Roman people. The Roman woman should accept her place in society, never try to usurp power for herself, be chaste and respectable, and act as a traditional ideal matron. Though historians may drum up women's behavior for narrative or moralizing effect, it is necessary to include the commentary on their inviolability as it relates to the safety and prestige of the state as well as their infidelity and lechery as a chief cause of crisis or undermining the leading men of Rome.

With this general commentary concluded, the sexual aspects of Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, and Elagabalus will be examined in context with a focus on the implications of their bad behaviors. The nature of manhood, sexual propriety, tyrannical *libido*, and the appropriate gender roles of women play a role in the discussion that follows. This section served to outline the process of becoming a man, maintaining that manhood, what deviated from *vir* behavior, and how a tyrant is emasculated or emasculates his subjects.

Chapter Two: The Julio-Claudians

Chapter Two offers a commentary on Dio's presentation of the Julio-Claudians rather than a full historical assessment of events within each reign. I will not argue over the "real" occurrences or factual history of each reign, but I will assess the character traits or actions, however ambiguous or obvious, that contribute to understanding Dio's use of sexual misconduct as an index of the qualities of a good or bad emperor. The emperor's behavior is of primary concern. However, at some points, the character of those surrounding him or those he has enabled becomes the focus. Enabling base or wicked actions with sexual underpinnings reflect on the emperor just as much as his misdeeds. The emperor's treatment of women, his household, the senatorial elite, the institution of marriage, and religion are all involved in Dio's presentation of the emperor's sexual misconduct. I will elaborate on each imperial biography, explaining why Dio writes about certain issues or neglects others while interpreting what the consequences of the emperor's behavior *should* be.¹⁸¹ Of secondary concern is what the audience should recognize within the interpretation, or the "hidden narrative" that is present, a discourse in which Dio makes sense of imperial court life through the lens of his own day, where bad emperors committed numerous sexual offenses. By "hidden narrative," I refer to the implicit information that the audience possesses, that is, the cultural understanding of sexual norms and their social and legal ramifications, and the ancient audience's ability to infer why the behavior of the

¹⁸¹ Dio deliberately leaves out information in accounts of emperors that may be too dubious to be plausible. For example, he leaves out the detailed orgies of Tiberius described by Suetonius and the dinner parties where Caligula assaults senators' wives and then issues their husbands divorce papers. Based on the details I provide for each account, Dio was undoubtedly familiar with the stories but chose to describe them differently.

emperor is bad more than a modern reader could understand it as other than slanderous or entertaining gossip.

I. Tiberius

“At all events, the two emperors differed so completely from each other, that some suspected that Augustus, with full knowledge of Tiberius' character, had purposely appointed him his successor that his own glory might be enhanced thereby.”¹⁸²

Dio's account of Tiberius is very different than those presented in Tacitus's *Annals* (6) and Suetonius' *Tiberius* (43), which depict Tiberius as having uncontrollable *libido* and acting as a sexual monster, even inventing new forms of sexual deviancy during his orgies. While Dio and Suetonius used the same written sources, Dio chose to focus on Tiberius's *dissimulatio*, rancor, and cruelty in his character.¹⁸³ It creates a complex analysis in which glimpses into the emperor's vices outside of cruelty and bloodthirstiness are more challenging to pinpoint, and the general perception of his reign as good or bad is ambiguous. As Mallan describes it, there is a general rule about each emperor that there is “superficially something of imperial Severan statuary about the emperors that appear in Dio's history. They are, in most cases, variations on a common theme. Bad emperors tend to persecute virtuous members of the elite while leading lewd or luxurious lives themselves.”¹⁸⁴ Dio does not entirely downplay the lewd behavior of Tiberius

¹⁸² Dio, *Roman History*, 56.45.3.

¹⁸³ Ronald Syme, “History or Biography. The Case of Tiberius Caesar,” *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 23, no. 4 (1974): 481–96, 482, 495.

¹⁸⁴ Christopher Mallan, “‘But He Possessed a Most Singular Nature’: Cassius Dio on Tiberius,” In *Emperors and Political Culture in Cassius Dio's Roman History*, edited by Caillan Davenport and Christopher Mallan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 133-57, 133.

but does not have the lurid details Suetonius and Tacitus describe. To Dio, the question of Tiberius's reign seems to be focused on episodic accounts of good and bad, virtue and vice, and a general atmosphere of amazement that no one had disposed of Tiberius for his behaviors. In his narrative, Tiberius is not wholly a monster; Dio recognizes much of the good within him. At the beginning of his reign, Tiberius brought all matters to the Senate (57.7.2), did not accept many titles and honors, "he was democratic in all circumstances alike" (57.8), he allowed no worship of himself (57.9), he did not initiate *maiestas* trials on his own behalf (57.9.2), he restored buildings (57.10), he banished the actors for "debauching women and stirring up tumults" (57.21.3), and he was easy to approach and address for the senators (57.11.1). Tiberius liked to be thought of as "*senator et iudex* and *iustissimus princeps*."¹⁸⁵ Dio states, before a shift in Tiberius' behavior, that:

Tiberius, now, began to treat more harshly those who were accused of any crime, and he became angry with his son Drusus, who was most licentious and cruel (so cruel, in fact, that the sharpest swords were called Drusian after him), and he often rebuked him both privately and publicly. Once he said to him outright in the presence of many witnesses: "While I am alive you shall commit no deed of violence or insolence; and if you dare to try, not after I am dead, either." For Tiberius lived a very temperate life for a time, and would not allow anyone else to indulge in licentiousness, but punished many for it. And yet once, when the senators desired to have a penalty imposed by law upon those who were guilty of lewd living, he would make no such provision, explaining that it is better to correct them privately in some way or other than to inflict any public punishment upon them. For under existing conditions, he said, there was a chance that

¹⁸⁵ Barbara Natalie Nagel, "The Tyrant as Artist: Legal Fiction and Sexual Violence under Tiberius," *Law and Literature* 25, no. 2 (2013): 286–310, 300.

some of them would restrain themselves through fear of disgrace, in the endeavor to escape detection; but if the law should once be overcome by human nature, no one would pay any heed to it.¹⁸⁶

Tiberius seems like a good emperor. He rebukes licentiousness in others, kicks out the worst segments of society for adultery with women, treats the senate well, and honors his friends, but this narrative, just like Tacitus and Suetonius, soon shifts, except it's more of a mixed bag of vice and virtue for Dio. Tiberius, as presented in Book 57, demonstrates mostly positive behavior. There are few significant abuses to speak of, notably that he feared his adopted son Germanicus and his family because they had favor with the Germanic and Pannonian legions and the behavior Germanicus engaged in as a result. Agrippina is also depicted as having ambition and a lofty lineage, which prevented Tiberius from opposing her. According to Dio, Tiberius was calculating in his fear, knowing that his position would be delicate if Germanicus decided to rebel. Tiberius worried about his position enough even to employ his astrologer to read the fortunes of prominent men and kill off those with good fortune.¹⁸⁷ The question of appearance versus inner character is at the core of Dio's narrative. Was Tiberius a great pretender, a hypocrite, or genuine in his judicious behavior? It appears that Tiberius is somewhat kept in check by his calculated fear of being deposed but also possesses a cunning intellect to maintain his position. If Tiberius is praiseworthy, even with his actions against leading men in Rome, what causes his vice to appear? Did he always possess inherent vice? There is a definable shift in

¹⁸⁶ Dio, *Roman History*, 57.13.1-4.

¹⁸⁷ Dio, *Roman History*, 57.19.2, 57.6.2-3.

this character that follows the death of Germanicus and Drusus, just as in Tacitus, and it expressed itself in his choice of companion, Sejanus, and his withdrawal to Capri.¹⁸⁸

1. Such was Tiberius behavior in all matters as long as Germanicus lived; but after his death he changed his course in many aspects. Perhaps he had been at heart from the first what he later showed himself to be, and had been merely shamming while Germanicus was alive, because he saw his rival lying in wait for the sovereignty; or perhaps he was excellent by nature, but drifted into vice when deprived of his rival.¹⁸⁹

2. Up to this time (the death of Germanicus), as we have seen, Tiberius had done a great many excellent things and had made but few errors; but now, when he no longer had a rival biding his chance, he changed to precisely the reverse of his previous conduct, which had included much that was good. Among other ways in which his rule became cruel, he pushed to the bitter end the trials for *maiestas*, in cases where complain was made against anyone for committing any improper act, or uttering any improper speech, not only against Augustus but also against Tiberius himself and against his mother.¹⁹⁰

In two instances, Dio asserts a change in Tiberius' behavior in Book 57 that carries over into Book 58. Tiberius becomes more of a recluse, promotes Sejanus to praetor, makes him an advisor, and moves to Capri, where he decides to live permanently. Syme asserts that Tiberius did not like court life and the company of women, hence why he never remarried either. He was caught between "four widows." Livia, Antonia Minor (mother of Livilla), Agrippina the Elder, and Livia Julia (daughter of Drusus and Livilla).¹⁹¹ Dio explains his withdrawal to Capri as being caused by Livia (his mother) being troublesome in her matters at home, and "it was chiefly on her account that he removed to Capreae."¹⁹² Dio leads the reader to believe that Tiberius's retreat

¹⁸⁸ Mallan, "But He Possessed a Most Singular Nature," 152.

¹⁸⁹ Dio, *Roman History*, 57.13.6.

¹⁹⁰ Dio, *Roman History*, 57.19.1.

¹⁹¹ Syme, "History or Biography," 487.

¹⁹² Dio, *Roman History*, 57.12.6, 57.22.4b. Sejanus incensed Tiberius against Agrippina and her sons.

to Capri is out of wariness due to the political intrigue that had beset him and a willingness to let Sejanus ruin Agrippina, as he feared her even when Germanicus was dead. Dio also presents the issue as Tiberius's desire to enact his *dissimulatio* from afar and to remove himself from the direct responsibility of having anyone killed or harsh punishment meted out.¹⁹³ Dio suggests that if Tiberius had never moved to Capri, Sejanus may not have risen as far as he did to abuse the Roman state.¹⁹⁴ While in Capri Tiberius begins to rule with and by fear, through Sejanus, and ceases to give deference to the Senate. It is undoubtedly in Capri where Tiberius also engaged in his sexual depravity that Suetonius focuses on, and Dio alludes to. Yet, Dio has Sejanus as a stand-in character in Rome for Tiberius until Tiberius has no more use for him. Dio already told his audience that Tiberius chose Sejanus "because of the similarity of their characters" and the Romans "learned only too clearly, now that they were perishing at one another's hands, and their former woes were the work of Tiberius quite as much as the work of Sejanus."¹⁹⁵ What is evident is that Tiberius became exceptionally cruel, bloodthirsty, and tyrant-like in certain aspects of his reign. Each instance is handled by Dio differently, with the worst episodes being used to demonstrate his cruelty or his tyrannical nature, not that he was entirely consumed by his bad nature, as in Tacitus and Suetonius.

In the second portion of his rule, he became more of a hypocrite in his treatment of laws and sexual exploits. Several episodes of violence from this period have a sexual nature. Dio writes that, "His [Sejanus's] children also were put to death by decree, the girl (whom he had

¹⁹³ Walter M. Hayes, "Tiberius and the Future," *The Classical Journal* 55, no. 1 (1959): 2–8, 5.

¹⁹⁴ William James Buchhorn, "Tiberius Down the Line," *Fairmount Folio: Journal of History*, Vol. 4, (2016); 87-101, 91.

¹⁹⁵ Dio, *Roman History*, 58.16.4. Perishing at each other's hands due to a reigniting of treason trials.

betrothed to the son of Claudius) having been first outraged by the public executioner on the principle that it was unlawful for a virgin to be put to death in the prison.”¹⁹⁶ The most noteworthy case is the aforementioned execution of Junilla, Sejanus’s daughter, which is mentioned in Suetonius, Tacitus, and Dio similarly. Junilla is executed after her father, but because she was a virgin, the executioner raped her before strangling her. Tiberius is absent from the scene, so why make this episode of sexual violence attributable to him? Because Tiberius undoubtedly influenced the proceeding, even while not physically present, he had made such executions require his approval and had others enact their fulfillment, which was typical as Dio mentioned he was meticulous in making it appear he was not responsible. Nagel provides a key point about the ordeal: removing Junilla’s name from the account. Dio does not specify her by name on purpose to indicate the rape of a virgin, like Lucretia and Verginia in the past, did not instigate political change at all.¹⁹⁷ According to Nagal, her execution was meaningless, shameful, and sinister; “she is a wasted life, proof of the legal and moral deterioration of the principate.”¹⁹⁸ She is evidence of Tiberius’ perverse pleasure in following the exact letter of the law since there was no precedent for the execution of a virgin; she was raped, so her execution was not unprecedented. Another point of interest would be that Tiberius had essentially commissioned a crime, a *stuprum per vim*, or an illicit sexual act with violence, on a freeborn Roman virgin, a girl

¹⁹⁶ Dio, *Roman History*, 58.11.5. The decree was likely given by Macro, who Tiberius had given strict instructions to as part of his takeover of the Praetorian guard.

¹⁹⁷ In the case of Lucretia and Verginia there is a direct political consequence for attacking the women. Lucretia’s assault and death resulted in the end of the monarchy. Verginia’s attempted assault and kidnapping resulted in the fall of the *decimiviri*.

¹⁹⁸ Nagel, “The Tyrant as Artist,” 294.

likely around the age of eleven.¹⁹⁹ The ancient audience might not have had an issue with this; a virgin was technically not put to death after all, and she was guilty by association with her father, who had committed treason. However, the audience would surely have realized that this little girl was killed and recorded as being outraged not because it was “unlawful” but because Tiberius *chose*, by decree, to murder her in such a manner, using one of the lowest foulest offices in the Roman world, the executioner, to do so.²⁰⁰ This episode was not wholly without precedent. Tiberius choosing to enforce some cruel punishment that derives from the sex of his target is represented in his failed marriage. He hated Julia, Augustus’s daughter, so much for her alleged adultery, which Augustus had rightfully exiled her for, that Tiberius decided to take it one step further after her father died. Dio writes that, “Tiberius did not recall his wife Julia from the banishment to which her father Augustus had condemned her for unchastity, but even put her under lock and key until she perished from general debility and starvation.”²⁰¹

As is his cruel nature, Tiberius is acting within the law that allowed a husband, or father, to kill his daughter if she had been caught in adultery (within his home). However, she was serving her punishment in exile, but Tiberius *chose* to enact the law to kill her but did it with unique cruelty by making her starve to death. There was nothing questionable about what he did. However, if Augustus were still alive, it surely would not have happened, but the bloodthirsty nature of Tiberius was displayed in dealing with his former adulterous wife. However, punishing adultery was a penchant of Tiberius’s reign, not because he desired to punish actual adulterers

¹⁹⁹ David L. Vagi, “Tiberius Claudius Drusus († AD 20), Son of Claudius and Urgulanilla,” *American Journal of Numismatics* (1989-) 22 (2010): 81–92, 84.

²⁰⁰ Nagel, “The Tyrant as Artist,” 294. The executioner was so dishonorable an office that only a slave or stranger could possess it and they were not permitted to live within Rome itself.

²⁰¹ Dio, *Roman History*, 57.18.1a.

but because he manipulated the law, allowing adulterers to be killed, to punish prominent men. Dio asserts that Tiberius used the alleged affairs of Livilla, Drusus' wife, to cause men like Mamereus Aemilius Scaurus to commit suicide and others to be slain on false accusations.²⁰² It is ironic that he punished Julia and the paramours of Livilla while he enabled Sejanus to commit adultery. Dio writes, "for by maintaining illicit relations with wives of nearly all the distinguished men, he learned what their husbands were saying and doing and he furthermore made them accessories to his crimes by promising to marry them."²⁰³ It was more ironic that Sejanus even carried on an adulterous affair with Drusus's wife, Livilla, which resulted in Drusus's death, which Tiberius did not become aware until after he murdered Sejanus.²⁰⁴ Tiberius enabled the abuse of women and the violation of the sanctity of marriage but did not use it as the reason to bring Sejanus down. Tiberius likely benefited from any report he received about men in Rome. Tiberius fulfills the role of a tyrant by proxy. He has elevated his unworthy companion, Sejanus, to a lofty office, allowing him to domineer over the Romans with cruelty, including wife stealing and murder. Outside of the case of Junilla, these instances do not express direct sexual deviance by Tiberius. It demonstrates more the nature of his character that Tiberius bends the law to act mercilessly without taking responsibility for his actions, making him tyrannical in specific episodes. Some of those episodes eschew the ideas around punishment for *stuprum* (sex crimes).²⁰⁵ Though I argue the acts presented are inherently based on violations of sexual norms (adultery as *stuprum*), these acts of Tiberius and Sejanus demonstrate how they perversely enforce the law, how Tiberius himself orders an unprecedented rape of a freeborn

²⁰² Dio, *Roman History*, 58.24.4-5.

²⁰³ Dio, *Roman History*, 58.3.7a-8.

²⁰⁴ Dio, *Roman History*, 57.22.2.

²⁰⁵ Nagel, "The Tyrant as Artist," 289; Dio, *Roman History*, 58.10.2, 58.15.4, 57.19.4.

virgin girl and how adultery is a negligible crime for the tyrant and his associates. Other examples highlight deviancy less abstractly.

When it comes to the actual sexual deviance of the emperor, there are two specific instances in which Dio mentions Tiberius had done something sexually unacceptable. Dio writes:

For his course in these matters Tiberius received praise, and especially because he would not accept numerous honours that were voted to him because of these acts. But the sensual orgies which he carried on shamelessly with persons of the highest rank, both male and female, brought him ill repute. For example, there was the case of his friend Sextus Marius When this Marius, now, had sent away his daughter, a strikingly beautiful girl, to a place of refuge, in order to prevent her from being outraged by Tiberius, he was charged with having criminal relations with her himself, and because of this he perished together with his daughter. All this brought disgrace upon the emperor, and his connection with the death of Drusus and Agrippina gave him a reputation for cruelty.²⁰⁶

Since Dio and Suetonius likely used the same material when creating their account of Tiberius, Dio is most certainly referring to the orgiastic behavior and sexual performances that he held on Capri. While orgiastic behavior, as mentioned in chapter one, is not acceptable because it is seen as a luxurious and effeminate excess, it is the target of his orgies that gains him “ill repute.” Tiberius, in his old age, engaged in sexual activities that were unbecoming of his status as emperor, can be seen as effeminate due to the luxurious excess, and are shameful because of the status of those involved. Unfortunately, Dio does not give the salacious details of Suetonius, so it is difficult to determine the implications of his ill repute and who were the participants of his sensual orgies. Yet, Dio does tell us of one participant long after Tiberius’s rule. When Vitellius is put into a position by his troops to obtain power, Dio describes the affairs in Book 64 by stating that “All that they had regard to in him was his noble birth, for they ignored the fact that he had been a loved-boy of Tiberius and was living a life in keeping with

²⁰⁶ Dio, *Roman History*, 58.22.1-4.

that licentious beginning.”²⁰⁷ Vitellius, a man of equestrian rank and future emperor, participated in Tiberius’s orgies. The insinuation is that he was a *puer*, a boy who was on the receiving end of sexual acts. Thus, the ancient reader, probably already acquainted with the stories of Suetonius’s biography, can infer that Tiberius was engaged in disturbing, unnatural sex with boys that were meant to be off-limits. Tiberius’s act would have undermined the manhood and chastity of his participants, especially the young men, and ruined their chance of becoming a *vir* or *matron*. The irony for the reader is even richer as the entire account of Vitellius as a boy toy that manages to make it to the role of emperor demonstrates just how much social decay had transpired from Tiberius to Nero. Regardless, Tiberius preyed on the youth of the aristocracy and made their anxieties justified. Children and adults, male and female, were being debauched by Tiberius and having their bodily integrity compromised, just as a slave would, if not by Tiberius himself, then by each other in his presence. Tiberius was subverting sexual norms in an unusual way and a way that should have brought him censure, yet it did not result in his undoing.

The daughter of Sextus Marius, a member of the high-ranking men and women Dio describes, also found herself the target of Tiberius’s tyrannical *libido*. Marius, having to physically hide his daughter from Tiberius so that he would not “outrage” her, is charged with incest when Tiberius does not get his way, and both he and his daughter are killed. Tiberius undermined Marius’s identity as *paterfamilias*. Marius could not let his daughter be outraged by the emperor as it would undermine his family’s virtue, his *auctoritas*, and, as Tiberius was not likely to marry this girl, he would have been subjecting his daughter to adultery or even *raptio*. Whatever the case, had Tiberius succeeded, he would have been committing *sutprum per vim*, or

²⁰⁷ Dio, *Roman History*, 64.4.2.

a violent sex crime due to the fact he was attempting to rape the girl. Thus, Marius and his daughter perish in a way that resembles Appius Claudius's attempted rape of Verginia, except this time, the father and daughter both die to escape the lust of the man in power. Tiberius's actions were that of a tyrant; he had pursued sexual excess and luxury, engaged in rampant pederasty with freeborn youths, adultery (or attempted adultery), and caused the deaths of leading citizens. Yet, Tiberius is not implied as a passive partner and is not made effeminate in his actions. Only his lust and lack of self-control, his excessive sexual behavior, and his pursuit of these things in old age with freeborn men, women, and youth are tyrannical. Furthermore, his actions do not highlight sexual deviance but serve more as an indication of his cruelty. His lust and orgiastic behavior led him to desire a freeborn maiden, and because he cannot have her, he kills both her and her father. This points towards his cruelty, yet it is cruelty born of sexual desire. If, as indicated in chapter one, the emperor's sexual excess and indulgence meant he could fail to administer the empire properly, could his desire have also allowed Sejanus's crimes to go unnoticed or even be accepted by Tiberius? That is more speculation than fact. Dio conveys to the reader a sense of a shifty, suspicious, and cruel emperor who began his reign well, sporadically did good things, and then revealed his hidden vices and engaged in them without restraint. Dio summarizes Tiberius at his death by writing, "Thus Tiberius, who possessed a great many virtues and a great many vices, and followed each set in turn as if the other did not exist, passed away in this fashion on the twenty-sixth day of March."²⁰⁸

What is the ancient audience, or the modern, to make of Tiberius's reign? Was Tiberius a sexually deviant monster, as Suetonius would write, or an emperor who prided himself on using

²⁰⁸ Dio, *Roman History*, 52.28.5.

the law, *dissimulatio*, and cruelty, as Dio writes? In Dio's text, it appears to be a mixture of both only when the episodic events are interpreted with context. Tiberius's ability to continuously wield power, overcome rebellious aristocrats, and maintain order until his death is commendable. Yet, his cruel punishments, *libido*, and perversion of the laws overshadow his reign. Dio leaves an ambiguous view of Tiberius that focuses less on his character, therefore less on tyrannical behavior, and more on the character of his rule, failing to leave a "uniform ethical portrait of the emperor" and leaving the judgment of Tiberius up to his readers.²⁰⁹ Tiberius's vices are a subordinate subject to the various aspects of his reign, which focus on his development of the Principate and his relationship with the Senate. Vices and ethical behavior take a backseat, but through his interpretation, Dio does join, however minimally, in the anti-Tiberian trend of Suetonius and Tacitus. Dio undoubtedly recognized that the former historians were writing under the patronage of a new regime and a hostile attitude regarding the Julio-Claudians was not surprising, however, he refrains from some of the more outrageous actions listed in the former narratives. The sexual excesses of Tiberius and his unusual cruelty make a small appearance. The ancient reader would have recognized the references and the significance of an executed virgin, a permissive adulterer, and a lewd old man to the cruel nature of Tiberius's reign.

II. Caligula

"For Gaius invariably went so by contraries in every matter, that he not only emulated but even surpassed his predecessor's licentiousness and bloodthirstiness, for which he used to censure him, whereas of the qualities he praised in the other, he imitated not one."²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ Mallan, "But He Possessed a Most Singular Nature," 156.

²¹⁰ Dio, *Roman History*, 59.4.1.

Gaius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, or Caligula, is the third Julio-Claudian emperor and is often regarded as the “mad emperor” for his actions during his reign. At the outset, it appeared that Caligula would not become an autocratic ruler. Dio even acknowledges that he had a “reputation for generosity” because of his donatives to the people and Praetorians, as well as his abandonment of the treason trials at the start of his reign.²¹¹ Yet, this reputation does not last long in Dio’s account. It does not even make it out of the second chapter of Book 59. This generosity led Caligula to wanton spending and to waste the funds in the state treasury. Dio goes on to stress his impudence to all forms of control and respectability, stating that Caligula:

went through this same process of deterioration, too, in almost all other respects. Thus, he had seemed at first most democratic, to such a degree that he would send no letters either to the people or to the senate nor assume any of the imperial titles; yet he became most autocratic, so that he took in one day all the honors which Augustus had with difficulty been induced to accept.²¹²

For Dio, Caligula was a despot from the start, which goes against accepted historical arguments that Caligula’s later illness had triggered some type of behavioral change.²¹³ A fundamental feature of Dio’s writing is a flair for the dramatic and anachronistic style of writing, either projecting the reality of the Severan Dynasty, which he lived under, onto the past or misplacing historical events on purpose.²¹⁴ For Dio’s narrative, Caligula needed to be detestable.

²¹¹ Dio, *Roman History*, 59.2.1.

²¹² Dio, *Roman History*, 59.3.1-2.

²¹³ John William Humphrey, “A Historical Commentary on Cassius Dio’s Roman History, Book 59 (Gaius Caligula),” *Retrospective Theses and Dissertations*, 1919-2007 (The University of British Columbia, 1976): ii-327, 100.

²¹⁴ For example, Dio has his marriage to Junia Claudilla, his first wife, end in divorce, which is inaccurate as she died during childbirth. It was important that Dio make Caligula a wife-stealing tyrant.; M. P. Charlesworth, “The Tradition about Caligula,” *Cambridge Historical Journal* 4, no. 2 (1933): 105–19, 107, 118.

His impudence and tyrannical lust, treatment of the senate, and wanton use of money necessitated it, so Caligula was a rotten egg from the beginning.²¹⁵ Dio is sly in describing Caligula's beginning acts, disguising an insult to the emperor by masking it with a criticism of how he spends the money in the treasury. Dio writes:

As it was, however, he lavished boundless sums upon actors (whose recall he at once brought about), upon horses, upon gladiators, and everything of the sort; and thus in the briefest space of time he exhausted the large sums of money that had accumulated in the treasury and at the same time convicted himself of having made the earlier gifts, also, as the result of an easy-going temper and lack of judgment.²¹⁶

At first glance, this is not an odd criticism, and it seems directed at the wanton spending of the emperor. However, any close reader of Dio's history who has read through the Julio-Claudian emperors would easily recognize what Dio is implying. First, the actors, whom Tiberius had banished, he had recalled, and actors were one of the detested members of Roman society, occupying a space at the bottom of the hierarchical social order. Gladiators were also of that low rank, so for Caligula to have used the funds in such a manner was wasteful and contributed to a drain on the treasury, displaying his "lack of judgment." What could have influenced this decision? Was it Caligula's impudence alone, or could he have been influenced, especially regarding the actors, to have spent the money this way?²¹⁷ Dio does not give the reason in this chapter, and it is not until Book 60, which discusses the emperor Claudius, that the reader understands Caligula's possible deference to the actors. Dio writes of the actor Mnester,

²¹⁵ Joseph Bissler, "Caligula Unmasked: An Investigation of the Historiography of Rome's Most Notorious Emperor," Master's Thesis, Kent State University (2013): i-109, 14.

²¹⁶ Dio, *Roman History*, 59.2.5.

²¹⁷ Marleen Boudreau Flory, "Caligula's 'Invrecondia': A Note on Dio Cassius 59.12.1," *Hermes* 114, no. 3 (1986): 365-71, 365. Caligula admired his impudence, which Suetonius lampoons him for.

whom Messalina had conducted an affair with, that “he had once been on intimate terms with Gaius” and that Messalina rewarded him for his consenting to also “lie with her.”²¹⁸ Dio is possibly inferring that Gaius had sexual relations with Mnester, a male actor, and, if the argument presented in Chapter One, that an emperor’s submission to his lustful desires, especially with regards to a member of inferior rank (especially a man) could cause concern that he had submitted or catered to them in other aspects of his rule.²¹⁹

Unfortunately, Roman historians Suetonius and Dio do not provide a starting date for this relationship, so without it, one must place stock in the assumption that the relationship started early in his reign, as Caligula’s reign was short-lived (A.D. 37 to 41) and that Mnester also enjoyed prominence in Claudius’s reign. Furthermore, Dio places Caligula’s love of “giving exhibitions of pantomimic dancing” (Mnester was also a renowned pantomimic dancer) and his love of “acting in tragedy” before his second marriage to Cornelia Orestilla, which would have occurred sometime between A.D. 37-38, allowing for some leeway in placing the beginning of some form of relationship with Mnester possibly early on in Caligula’s reign.²²⁰ If that is the case, Mnester, Caligula’s favorite, could have swayed the emperor’s judgment. Admittedly, this is speculation. However, Dio pairing poor judgment with the rehabilitation of the actors and then later calling Mnester an intimate of Gaius could imply more than friendship. It could support the Roman aristocratic perspective that sexual involvement with those of lower rank translates to an inability to control one’s lustful desires, which leads to submission on political issues (exhibiting poor judgment). What is genuinely uncertain about the issue is if Caligula had played the

²¹⁸ Dio, *Roman History*, 60.22.4.

²¹⁹ John William Humphrey, “A Historical Commentary on Cassius Dio’s Roman History,” 49; Dio, *Roman History*, 57.21.3. Tiberius had previously banished the actors from Rome.

²²⁰ Wardle “Caligula and His Wives,” 111–13; Dio, *Roman History*, 59.5.5.

submissive role, which would have unmanned Caligula and undermined his role as emperor altogether. However, Dio does not specify the act, making speculation about this issue more difficult. Early in the narrative, the only hint that Caligula is somewhat effeminate or offensive is that he once “sent an urgent summons at night to the leading men of the senate, as if for some important deliberation, and then danced before them.”²²¹ In Chapter One, it is established that Romans regarded dancing as an effeminate act. Still, it could also serve as an example of Caligula mocking the senate and undermining its prestige, a display of the impudence that those like Suetonius attribute to him. It is only by connecting the behavior of Caligula with his sisters and Drusilla’s husband, Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, that further claims can be made.²²²

Regardless of the speculation regarding the motivation for Caligula’s lavish expenditures on actors and gladiators, little speculation is required for Dio’s description of the emperor that follows. Almost immediately in Book 59, the reader is exposed to the libidinous behavior of the emperor, placing his lustful nature near the start of his reign to give the reader an idea of what kind of man the emperor is. Throughout his imperial biography of Caligula, Dio highlights the relationship between Caligula and his sisters, using it to dishonor Caligula’s memory. Dio writes:

[1] Though he had proved himself the most libidinous of men, had seized one woman at the very moment of her marriage, and had dragged others from their husbands, he afterwards came to hate them all save one; and he would certainly have detested her, had he lived longer. Towards his mother, his sisters, and his grandmother Antonia he conducted himself at first in the most dutiful manner possible He annulled all the measures that had been voted against them, and recalled such as were in exile on their account. Yet, after doing all this, he showed himself the most impious of men toward both his grandmother and his sisters. For he forced the former to seek death by her own hand, because she had rebuked him

²²¹ Dio, *Roman History*, 59.5.5.

²²² Wardle, “Caligula and his Wives,” 115. According to Wardle, Lepidus appears to be Caligula’s catamite.

for something; and as for his sisters, after ravishing them all he confined two of them on an island, the third having already died.²²³

[2] Drusilla was married to Marcus Lepidus, at once the favorite and lover of the emperor, but Gaius also treated her as a concubine. When her death occurred at this time, her husband delivered the eulogy and her brother accorded her a public funeral. The Pretorians with their commander and the equestrian order by itself ran about the pyre and the boys of noble birth performed the equestrian exercise called “Troy” about her tomb. All the honours that had been bestowed upon Livia were voted to her, and it was further decreed that she should be deified, that a golden effigy of her should be set up in the senate-house, and that in the temple of Venus in the Forum a statue of her should be built for her.²²⁴

[3] Another of his victims was Lepidus, that lover and favorite of his, the husband of Drusilla, the man who had together with Gaius maintained improper relations with the emperor's other sisters, Agrippina and Julia, the man whom he had allowed to stand for office five years earlier than was permitted by law and whom he kept declaring he would leave as his successor to the throne. To celebrate this man's death he gave the soldiers money, as though he had defeated some enemies, and sent three daggers to Mars Ultor in Rome. He deported his sisters to the Pontian Islands because of their relations with Lepidus, having first accused them in communicating to the senate of many impious and immoral actions.²²⁵

These are three important sections from Book 59 that highlight Caligula's incestuous relationship with his sisters, all of whom were married when their adulterous affair with their brother took place.²²⁶ Caligula's actions with his sisters and Marcus Lepidus are both *stuprum* and *incestum* (*stuprum* as the superordinate of *incestum*), as their sexual connection makes them adulterers and guilty of incest.²²⁷ The audience would recognize that Caligula, ravishing his

²²³ Dio, *Roman History*, 59.3.3, 59.3.6.

²²⁴ Dio, *Roman History*, 59.11.1-2.

²²⁵ Dio, *Roman History*, 59.22.6-8.

²²⁶ Humphrey, “An Historical Commentary on Cassius Dio's Roman History,” 67.

²²⁷ John Murray's *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (1875) defined *incestum* as not only the narrow category of an irreligious act that involved sexual intercourses and the unchastity of a Vestal Virgin but also sexual intercourse of persons within certain degrees of consanguinity. That which was *stuprum* was considered *incestum* when the connection between the parties had no *m*, and thus likely had some consanguinity in the example I have used.

sisters, treating Drusilla as a concubine, and allowing Lepidus to join the mix, would have been *impudicus* and linked with the status of someone who is *infamis*. Caligula would be no better than anyone in the lowest ranks of society. He could have been subject to exile or *relegatio* if he were anyone other than the emperor.²²⁸ Even worse was that, as part of his adultery, Caligula was open to being accused in court by Marcus Lepidus (or his sister's other husbands) because Lepidus actively knew of the adultery. Still, Caligula was the emperor, and Lepidus also played along, engaging in intercourse with Caligula's sisters. Lepidus's participation makes him an adulterer and no better than a pimp for failing to punish his wife and permitting adultery, which should have, hypothetically, made Lepidus no better than the lowest ranks of the *infames*. Under Augustus's reforms, Lepidus, Caligula, and his sisters would have all been guilty of *stuprum*. Caligula's behavior was as reprehensible as it was hypocritical. As the emperor, he was beyond reproach for his actions, and the incest and adultery that characterized his relationship with his sisters and Lepidus demonstrate a tyrannical libido. It is a fundamental aspect of Dio's assessment of Caligula's reign, just as it is a feature of Suetonius's depiction. For the crime of *incestum*, Caligula's incestuous behavior is unnatural and tyrannical; the Roman/Greek audience reading Dio's work would understand that it is the classic sign of a tyrant to abuse women and, even worse, to have intercourse with blood relatives. For the *malus princeps*, adultery and incest are commonplace pieces of the literary despot. Dio styles Caligula as *imperator*, not because of any military achievement, but for his numerous adulteries.²²⁹ Dio inverted the term *imperator*, to not mean military victory and achievement, but lustful adulterous achievement.

²²⁸ *Relegatio*, simply put, resembles a form of house arrest or the barring of entry to certain places identified when the punishment is handed down.

²²⁹ Dio, *Roman History*, 59.25.5a.

His relationship with Marcus Lepidus, whom Dio writes as his “lover” or “beloved,” is unique in Dio’s narrative, and the reader should recognize, though much later on in the narrative during the reign of Elagabalus, that the term “ἐραστής” (lover) is used sparingly throughout the text. Why the choice of words about Lepidus? It implies that Dio uses a “criticism common to the bad emperor,” which would be his sexual inversion.²³⁰ The desire by Caligula to penetrate an adult male should be understood as an anomaly and unnatural. It was even more unnatural to be penetrated, even if it was by the emperor, as the sexual domination it implied would have meant a loss of reputation, a morally weak *vir*, and a failure to control his lustful desires, even though Caligula’s lustful desires were also fulfilled. Sexual passivity, if recognized in the courts or senate, normally resulted in being barred from office and unable to participate in court. The situation, for the reader, becomes ironic once Dio claims that Caligula had sworn to make him his successor, which would mean that a man whom another had penetrated would be able to assume the highest position and domineer over *viri* whose masculinity was not in question. However, what Dio is implying, and the reader understands, is not that Lepidus was responsible for these acts himself or that it was his sexual depravity that was the target of the criticism, but Caligula’s. As explained in Chapter One, Roman historians believed a tyrant’s lack of sexual restraint in private life often led to tyrannical public actions, such as bestowing public offices and honors on his paramours. It was Caligula’s lack of sexual restraint and affection for Drusilla’s husband, a member of the *equites*, that allowed for Lepidus’s potential promotion to the position of *princeps*, not any achievement of his own. Drusilla and her sisters became the personal prostitutes of Caligula, and, at the same time, their husbands were also proven to be weak *viri* for

²³⁰ Scott, *Emperors and Usurpers*, 133.

having no control over their household by allowing rampant adultery. So, Caligula upsets the order of the *domus* of his sexual partners while committing incest and adultery simultaneously, making the entire imperial household a mockery.

Caligula's relationship with his sisters, and especially with Drusilla, his favorite, also presents a complex dilemma when Drusilla dies. He accords her many of the same funerary privileges that Livia, one of the greatest female *exempla* in Dio's narrative, had possessed at her death, making Drusilla an equal of Livia. The audience should understand the irony that an adulterous and incestuous woman whose sexual connection with her brother is unnatural and debauched could be compared to an honorable and chaste woman like Livia. Dio uses the account to demonstrate Caligula's impudence, sardonic humor, and insult towards Livia, the noblest imperial woman that had existed at the time; Caligula made Drusilla into a mockery of how women should behave.²³¹ But Drusilla's bad behavior is not the most appalling. The behavior of Agrippina and Livilla results in Lepidus's death, as well as their exile to the Pontine islands; Dio turns their relationship with their brother on its head as Caligula is in an adulterous affair with all of them but as unable to control his household. His sisters and Lepidus are prosecuted for their adultery, in which he played a part in. The adultery is just a pretense, as all were said to have conspired against Caligula in a plot to make Lepidus emperor. Caligula's honoring of his sisters and male lover backfired in a plot that demonstrated his lack of control and sexual excess, nearly leading to his assassination. Dio's account turns on the idea, expressed in Chapter One, that adulterous women are dangerous to the state. In this case, the adulterous women conspire against the emperor for his removal.

²³¹ Bissler, "Caligula Unmasked," 45.

The three excerpts highlighted the unnatural relationship and sexual behavior that characterize a portion of Caligula's reign and shed light on his character. However, there is another contributing element to Caligula's megalomaniacal behavior: Caligula also becomes blasphemous and pairs gender transgressions with his blasphemy. He also uses his godhood as a legitimizing factor for his incestuous relationships. Dio writes:

when some called him a demigod and others a god, he fairly lost his head. Indeed, even before this he had been demanding that he be regarded as more than a human being, and was wont to claim that he had intercourse with the Moon, that Victory put a crown upon him, and to pretend that he was Jupiter, and he made this a pretext for seducing numerous women, particularly his sisters; again, he would pose as Neptune, because he had bridged so great an expanse of sea; he also impersonated Hercules, Bacchus, Apollo, and all the other divinities, not merely males but also females, often taking the role of Juno, Diana, or Venus. Indeed, to match the change of name he would assume all the rest of the attributes that belonged to the various gods, so that he might seem really to resemble them. Now he would be seen as a woman, holding a wine-bowl and thyrsus, and again he would appear as a man equipped with a club and lion's skin or perhaps a helmet and shield. He would be seen at one time with a smooth chin and later with a full beard. Sometimes he wielded a trident and again he brandished a thunderbolt. Now he would impersonate a maiden equipped for hunting or for war, and a little later would play the married woman. Thus, by varying the style of his dress, and by the use of accessories and wigs, he achieved accuracy inasmuch diverse parts; and he was eager to appear to be anything rather than a human being and an emperor. Once a Gaul, seeing him uttering oracles from a lofty platform in the guise of Jupiter, was moved to laughter, whereupon Gaius summoned him and inquired, "What do I seem to you to be?" And the other answered (I give his exact words): "A big humbug."²³²

This lengthy passage serves two purposes in Dio's account. First, it helps to explain his incestuous relationship with his sisters. Second, it further demonstrates that Caligula was among the worst of emperors: his effeminate behavior was the ultimate sign of it. Initially, Dio uses the description to create a blasphemous scene where Caligula believes himself a god or acts as one,

²³² Dio, *Roman History*, 59.26.5-9.

saying he dresses as Jupiter to seduce women, especially his sisters. Caligula is mocking Jupiter to a degree, who married his sister Juno and uses this as justification or divine reasoning for his incestuous relationship with his sister. If the reader can link this behavior, the pretending to be a god or a genuine belief that he was one, with his adultery, incestuous behavior, and the chaotic state of the imperial household, then the reader can ascertain Dio's true intentions. By recalling that Dio has Caligula give his sisters Vestal Virgin privileges and deifies Drusilla after her death, the reader can perhaps infer that Dio's account of Caligula's incestuous behavior, whether real or slanderous, serves a larger purpose: to thwart Caligula's claim to have formed a divine family as part of the *domus augustana* and to dishonor the memory of the emperor.²³³ The worship of Drusilla after her death, with many priests and a temple in her honor, and Caligula's newfound identity in divine presentation would have offended the sensibilities of the elite in Rome, who, since Augustus, did not put stock into the idea that the emperor could be divine while living. For Dio, Caligula's incestuous relationships, mockery of religion, and adultery undermine his image as a member of the *domus augustana*. The reader may find it more difficult to realize this intention but would surely realize the mockery of religion, incest, and adultery as deviant aspects of Caligula's character, causing a poor reflection on his ability or legitimacy to rule.

The rest of the excerpt highlights the deities Caligula plays and some of his megalomaniac behavior, such as "having intercourse with the moon" and dressing as female deities. This is the only indication in Dio's account of Caligula's reign that he was a *mollis vir* aside from his interest in dancing, theater, and actors. Dio never casts Caligula as an effeminate male outside of this excerpt. Still, the behavior he does list is typical of the archetypal effeminate

²³³ Dio, *Roman History*, 59.3.4; Bissler, "Caligula Unmasked," 67.

tyrant who lacks judgment and self-control. First, as previously stated, the behavior was blasphemous. It was entirely acceptable for an emperor to present himself on coinage or in statues as divinely associated, as this relays ideas of strength, fertility, and a host of other virtues to the viewer, even if the divine association was to a goddess. Appearing as a god or goddess was an entirely different matter that surely offended the religious elite. Dio is also unique in his choice of divinities as Suetonius leaves out Juno and Diana; Dio includes them to emphasize the extent of the “twisted debauchery of the emperor.”²³⁴ In the Roman historiography, the purpose of dressing up differs in each account. For Suetonius, it is an exotic act with rich costumes; for Dio, it is a front for seducing women and parodying the Roman gods. Regardless, it appears as divine cross-dressing and is censured because it was embarrassing behavior for the emperor. Dio even uses a foreign lowly Gaul to remark that Caligula seems a “big humbug.”²³⁵ It is doubly offensive as the Roman audience should be able to identify, through imperial portraiture that surrounded them in the forums and temples of Rome, that Augustus had associated Diana with Virtus.²³⁶ Caligula was parodying that in an extreme form. Once again, Caligula’s impudence is on display as he combines gender transgressions and appearance with religion to create an atmosphere of blasphemy and behavior unbecoming of his rank. From having “intercourse with the moon” to acting out male and female deities, Dio presents the reader with a man who is unhinged and possesses megalomaniac tendencies along with his impudence. This behavior

²³⁴ Bissler, “Caligula Unmasked,” 79.

²³⁵ Dio, *Roman History*, 59.26.9.

²³⁶ Varner, “Transcending Gender,” 198.

would not be credible for a man of high esteem, but it was all believable for the monster of a man that is Caligula.²³⁷

As for the notion that Caligula was sexually inverted, behavior presented in Chapter One appears in the excerpt. Caligula appears smooth-chinned or in full beard as part of his outfits. Whether or not the appearance is part of his costume for a faithful reproduction of a deity's image is irrelevant. What is important is that Caligula was in his twenties, an age where the intentional appearance of a man with a smooth chin was deemed effeminate or made a man *mollis*.²³⁸ Dio only uses the term smooth-chinned twice in his narrative, describing the male lover of Elagabalus, Hierocles, and describing Caligula.²³⁹ With Hierocles, who has same-sex relations with Elagabalus, it is used to imply that he is effeminate or possesses an inverted sexuality. With Caligula, it is part of his costume. However, to appear with a shaven face as a young man meant one was boyish and, as outlined in Chapter One, attractive to other men.

Caligula's appearance is offensive and possibly represents his inverted sexuality. It could also support the earlier speculation that Caligula did have illicit sexual relations with Mnester, which is supported by the confirmed same-gender relationship between Caligula and Lepidus. Caligula also appears as a woman, an actual gender transgression, and wears wigs and carries women's accessories. As Chapter One outlines, wig-wearing and using a mirror (the accessory) are all actions associated with a sexually inverted man. The only part of ambiguity is what Dio means by Caligula "playing the married woman," as it is a single line that receives no explanation. Whether the reader should interpret this as Caligula being sexually submissive or a

²³⁷ David Woods, "Caligula's Sexual Desire for the Moon (Suet. *Calig.* 22.4)," *Museum Helveticum* 76, no. 2 (2019): 235–40, 240.

²³⁸ Smooth-chinned or clean-shaven mostly refers to depilation in this thesis.

²³⁹ Scott, *Emperors and Usurpers*, 135.

part of his elaborate acting and costume is not defined, making interpretation difficult. If it is part of his elaborate acting and costumes, it is in poor taste and effeminate. If it means a sexual role and Caligula is the one penetrated, it would carry far worse connotations. However, it is out of the realm of speculation for this thesis what Dio was trying to imply. Regardless, the presentation of Caligula here is explicitly feminine due to Caligula's smooth-shaven chin and wig-wearing with women's accessories. If one applies Suetonius example of Caligula's presentation of divinities as "exotic costumes," then the reader could imply from his effeminate and luxurious apparel that he had a "foulness of mind" and lacked self-control, as outlined in Chapter One.

Dio then transitions from Caligula's blasphemous behavior, adultery, and incest to another outrageous act. Dio describes how Caligula turned the imperial palace into a brothel full of the wives and children of senators to use it as a source of revenue. Dio writes,

This god, now, this Jupiter (for he was called by these names so much at the last that they even found their way into documents) at the same time that he was doing all this was also collecting money in most shameful and dreadful ways. One might, indeed, pass over in silence the wares and the taverns, the prostitutes and the courts, the artisans and the wage-earning slaves, and other such sources, from which he collected every conceivable tribute; but how could one keep silent about the rooms set apart in the very palace, and the wives of the foremost men as well as the children of the most aristocratic families that he shut up in those rooms and subjected to outrage, using them as a means of milking everybody alike? Some of those who thus contributed to his need did so willingly, but others very much against their will, lest they should be thought to be vexed. The multitude, however, was not greatly displeased by these proceedings but rejoiced with him in his licentiousness and in the fact that he used to throw himself each time on the gold and silver collected from these sources and roll in it.²⁴⁰

In one of his most outrageous acts, Caligula becomes the pimp of aristocratic wives and children, some against their will and some voluntarily, to raise revenue for the treasury he had

²⁴⁰ Dio, *Roman History*, 59.28.8-10.

drained. The first target of his forced prostitution and pimping is the wives of the foremost men, the senators, as they are forced into servitude. They lose the bodily autonomy secured by the marriage to their husband and his elite status and are defiled by patrons of the imperial palace. Caligula forces elite women into becoming *impudicus*, committing adultery, though involuntarily, and joining the ranks of the *infamis*, the lowest ranks of Roman society, the prostitutes, actors, gladiators, slaves, and pimps. Caligula has caused each woman to commit adultery; even worse, he is profiting from it. He relishes in the funds he has acquired, even rolling in the money, which was tainted money by association with its source. Caligula imposes on the women a status and servitude unbecoming of a woman of their rank and has negated their *libertas*. Every man who had intercourse with the women also engaged in *stuprum*, as the women were married, and legally, their husbands should have recourse to punishment. However, because Caligula was behind the act, their husbands were helpless. Typically, sex with a prostitute was not *stuprum*. However, regardless of what Caligula or the brothel patrons perceived them as, their status as “former” wives or elite women would have prevented them from becoming prostitutes. Caligula’s actions allowed for a sexual assault on freeborn Roman citizens, a heinous act that incurred the outrage of the Roman elite.

Furthermore, because these wives could also be mothers, the forced prostitution of them can be likened to rape or because they were “taken” to the palace, *raptio*, which resembles kidnapping. The rape of a *materfamilias* should result in capital punishment for the offender. Still, Caligula invites the “multitude” to “milk everyone alike” so that he can generate funds from his impudence or lack of respect for the institution of marriage and the senate. The chastity, modesty, and virtue of the elite women are assaulted to raise revenue. Chapter One argues that the Roman matron’s inviolability and chastity is also a symbol of the inviolability of Rome and a

guarantee of the health of Roman society. Caligula's actions directly threatened the social hierarchy by making the wives of the elite men subject to actions unbecoming of their rank. These women were violated at the behest of Caligula, resulting in ruined reputations, not just for her but also for her husband.

The other group outraged inside the imperial brothels are "children of the most aristocratic families." Unfortunately, Dio does not specify the gender of the children, so speculation is required for an analysis. If it is assumed that "children" is gender neutral, then perhaps male and female children were being used as prostitutes inside the brothel. It is *stuprum* for these children to be abused in this manner because they are freeborn Romans of senatorial or elite rank. The outrage imposed on them was not something the emperor should have been able to do honorably or legally. For the girls, it ruins their chances at future marriages and subjects them to a state of *infamia* at a young age, perhaps embroiling them in a life of prostitution. For the male children, the implication is worse. Suppose Caligula had young boys prostituted inside the imperial brothel. In that case, he was directly interfering with their process of becoming a *vir* and, instead, relegating them to the role of a *puer*. They were young sexual objects used by patrons. If the young men are penetrated or perform oral sex, then their identity as an elite man, a *vir*, is potentially lost. They would not be able to maintain the identity necessary for their progression through the upper echelons of society, their ability to assume the *toga virilis*, and possibly hinder the reception of their patrimony as they lost true *vir* status. However, this is highly speculative and subject to different interpretations, as Dio does not explain the situation beyond this excerpt. Only Suetonius offers a more salacious account of Caligula's mistreatment of the aristocratic wives and children. However, a third party, already mentioned, stands to suffer the most outrage. The wording of the excerpt is important as it is the wives of the *foremost men*

and children of the *aristocratic families* targeted. The foremost men are undoubtedly senators and, because children belong to the *pater* of the family, it is, in both instances, the men who are also outraged. The elite men have control over their *domus*, wives, and children, usurped by the emperor, and lose one of the critical functions that make them *viri*, the ability to protect and control their family. It is another demonstration of Caligula's impudence, his contempt for the elite, on whom tyrannical actions by an emperor can be focused on and used to assess the just or unjust nature of an emperor's reign.

Caligula's actions outraged noblewomen, freeborn youths, and the head of household, the *pater*. Caligula's creation of an imperial brothel, staffed with freeborn citizens, was an assault on the *libertas* of the elite class and a defilement of their bodily autonomy and impenetrability as wives and children of Roman *vir*. Rather than acting as a just emperor, Caligula appeared as a lowlife pimp with a high-class prostitution ring. Ironically, Caligula assumes the role of a pimp, that low-life member of society, where he had punished others, including Macro, his formerly trusted Praetorian Prefect, for being a pimp himself as a result of allowing Caligula to have an ongoing adulterous affair with his wife.²⁴¹ Caligula is a shameless hypocrite.

Caligula had no respect for the marriages of the elite, let alone the marriages of his sisters, so how did Caligula treat his wives? Caligula's first wife, Junia Claudilla, receives no mention in Dio's discussion of Caligula's wives, which becomes essential when discussing his final wife. However, at the outset of Book 59, Caligula appears as a wife-stealing tyrant, seizing women from their husbands and one wife, Cornelia Orestilla, directly from her marriage

²⁴¹ Dio, *Roman History*, 59.10.6. Caligula brought the charge of "playing the pander" against Macro.

ceremony to Gaius Calpurnius Piso.²⁴² Dio has the reader believe that Caligula frequently marries and divorces during his short reign, perhaps because he is lustful for other women or because of his affair with his sisters, but mainly because he is a wife-stealing tyrant. Caligula even punishes his second wife, Orestilla, and her former lover, Piso, by exiling them because they are engaged in a continuous “illicit” relationship.²⁴³ Caligula remains unmarried until Drusilla’s death, when he then marries Lolliana Paulina after compelling her husband to betroth her to him, but Caligula quickly dismisses her as well.²⁴⁴ According to Dio, Caligula divorces her because she is barren, but “really because he had got tired of her.”²⁴⁵ He then marries Milonia Caesonia, his mistress, who was an older woman and pregnant with his child, which implies that Caligula had an ongoing affair with her before their marriage. Dio has Caesonia married to Caligula one month before their child is born so that he would have conceived a “supernatural” child.²⁴⁶ The reader should recognize that Caligula is mocking Augustus, who had married Livia right after she had given birth, and it was rumored that it was Augustus’s child of adultery.²⁴⁷ Caligula’s rapid marriages seem to have an air of cruel humor, imbued with wife-stealing and miraculous conceptions meant to mock Augustus’s youthful decisions. However, the underlying theme in all of the marriages presented is that Caligula was trying to conceive an heir. He had not yet produced a child, according to Dio, and it was not until he married an older woman, his mistress, who had already borne children, that he could conceive. Dio betrays his intention of making Caligula solely a lustful wife-stealer when Caligula calculates and understands his need

²⁴² Dio, *Roman History*, 59.3.3, 59.8.7.

²⁴³ Dio, *Roman History*, 59.8.7.

²⁴⁴ Dio, *Roman History*, 59.12.1.

²⁴⁵ Dio, *Roman History*, 59.23.7.

²⁴⁶ Dio, *Roman History*, 29.23.8.

²⁴⁷ Flory, “Caligulla’s *Inverecundia*,” 367.

to fulfill his role as a *vir* and *pater patriae* to present an heir if he dies. Caligula's divorce and exile of Orestilla with Piso was done so that he would not appear as the infertile party and not allow either to remarry and conceive before he would.²⁴⁸ His divorce from Paulina is conducted for the same reason, so he would not appear infertile. The rapid rate of marriage and divorce, even if there was a bad taste in how he chose his wives, is an attempt to secure a marriage that resulted in pregnancy.

Caligula's desire for an heir and a fertile marriage may have been the most *vir*-like behavior he exhibited throughout his reign. The *genius* of Caligula, his generative power, was in doubt until he could successfully produce a child. In Dio's narrative, the underlying reasoning behind Caligula's frequent marriage was more than a mockery of his ancestors, the institution of marriage, and wife-stealing. However, those attributes are present, but a need to fulfill his role as *pater patriae* in a literal sense by producing an heir is an underlying factor in the marriages and Caligula's dismissal of his wives when conception did not happen early on, combined with the dismissal of their previous partners, demonstrates Caligula's desire not to be unmanned or have his virility questioned by his previous partners conceiving with someone else. Dio allows for this interpretation to succeed, though not historically accurate, because painting Caligula as a wife-stealing tyrant who commits adultery and then marries a Caesonia, already pregnant by him, to mock the behavior of Augustus makes a more tyrannical and defamatory image of the emperor. Generative power is linked with societal stability, and an emperor who could not fulfill his manly role in marriage was somewhat of a failure, his manhood in question. In reality, Caligula had already conceived a child in his first marriage. However, Claudilla died in childbirth, so his

²⁴⁸ Wardle, "Caligula's Wives," 117; Humphrey, "A Historical Commentary on Cassius Dio's Roman History," 113.

potency may or may not have been questioned. Still, by neglecting this fact, Caligula's drive for an heir at the expense of other men's wives makes for a more monstrous emperor, and Dio uses it to stress his impiety and irreverence.²⁴⁹

There is one final issue regarding sex and gender present in Caligula's reign that occurs and leads to his assassination. Dio has Cassius Chaerea, an officer of the Praetorian guard, as lead conspirator in the plot to kill Caligula. His reasoning for doing so was that the emperor had emasculated him multiple times. Dio writes,

But the men who actually killed Gaius were those I have named. Chaerea was an old-fashioned sort of man to begin with, and he had his own special cause for resentment. For Gaius was in the habit of calling him a wench, though he was the hardiest of men, and whenever it was Chaerea's turn to command the guard, would give him some such watchword as "Love" or "Venus."²⁵⁰

Caligula had insulted the dignity of Chaerea and emasculated him through his public mocking of the man, whom Dio describes as the "hardiest of men," and caused him public embarrassment. It was especially prevalent in the passing down of the imperial watchword, an essential aspect of any emperor's relationship with his guard and meant to relay political ideas asserted by the emperor.²⁵¹ Caligula made a mockery of the process and Chaerea using "love" and "Venus" as the words, which Chaerea would have to pass on to the other guards, no doubt incurring laughter at Chaerea's expense. Using "Venus" and making Chaerea repeat it was undoubtedly a jest towards the man himself, implying that he was sexually inverted or a eunuch and implying that, because Chaerea was humiliated in the process, Caligula favored other guards

²⁴⁹ David Wardle, *Suetonius' Life of Caligula: A Commentary*. Collection *Latomus: Revue d'études latines* vol. 22 (University of Michigan 1994), 145; Wardle, "Caligula's Wives," 110.

²⁵⁰ Dio, *Roman History*, 59.29.2.

²⁵¹ Jonathan Eaton, "The Political Significance of the Imperial Watchword in the Early Empire," *Greece & Rome* 58, no. 1 (2011): 48–63, 48.

more than him. Caligula insulted the dignity of a *vir*, a strong and masculine man, to the extent that Chaerea used it, amongst other factors, as one of his prime motivations for assassinating Caligula. Instead of renewing the bond between the emperor and his soldiers through the passing of the watchword, Caligula uses it to mock the masculinity of his officer.²⁵² To be unmanned and made effeminate by the emperor and in such a formal and important setting was beyond intolerable for Chaerea. His response to protect his identity and manliness resulted in the death of Caligula.

Dio's biography of Caligula contains all the standard trappings of a tyrannical ruler. Caligula abuses women and children, mocks religion, commits incest, is an adulterer, and mistreats the aristocratic class. His impudence, impiety, and irreverence are displayed in every instance, just as in Suetonius's narrative. Dio does not spare from commenting on the drama, describing Caligula as anything but human in his tyrannical behavior and mocking his actions, from dressing up as gods to committing incest with his sisters and undermining the divine claims of the *domus augustana*. The evil emperor is the heir to the tyranny, or rather the tyrannical *libido*, of Tiberius, and he amplifies that behavior on a much larger scale. When Tiberius engages in orgies with the high-ranking freeborn youth, Caligula employs them in an imperial brothel. Where Tiberius tries to seize a man's daughter for himself, Caligula takes other men's wives and undermines the control over the household a *vir* should possess, just as his predecessor before him. Caligula commits, enables, and revels in his *stuprum* and enjoys his licentious behavior to a degree Tiberius had not. His actions are presented as those of a monster and unbecoming of his rank. Caligula defiles his masculinity and the masculinity of those who

²⁵² Eaton, "The Political Significance of the Imperial Watchword," 63.

encounter him. He shows a lack of restraint combined with sexual excesses, and if his effeminate dress and behavior are considered, he becomes the archetypal emasculated tyrant, possessing no praiseworthy virtues. An ancient audience would recognize that Caligula is sexually inverted and possesses none of the manly restraint the emperor should have. His sexual appetite and abuse of the aristocratic class demonstrate that he is a morally weak man, unfit for rule.

Dio is writing from the aristocratic view, making fact and narrative hard to reconcile. He believes Caligula to be bad, and his treatment of the senate necessitates other bad behavior. His sexual preferences and abuses are the perfect tool to generate an idea in the reader's head of how depraved and debauched Caligula must be. Each instance of depravity has a greater meaning outside of legal and biographical ramifications. Caligula's incest and adultery undermine his role as *imperator* and *pater patriae* and mock his divine family. His sexual favorites receive offices and honors unfit for their actions and behavior, mocking the proper behavior of an imperial woman. His blasphemous behavior in appearing as male and female divinities connects to cultic cross-dressing. It makes him an unmanly tyrant and a defiler of religion. His rampant marriages display a lustful wife-stealing tyrant but also an emperor trying to prove his generative ability, one he is extremely conscious of. His establishment of an imperial brothel staffed by the wives and children of the foremost men in Rome is a direct assault on the *libertas* of freeborn Roman citizens who could not be legally subjected to such outrage and a compounding act of outrage to the senate if his adulteries and blasphemy were not enough. The emasculation of his Praetorian officer, Chaerea, leads to his assassination because Chaerea was a real *vir*. Caligula's behavior and actions were improper for an emperor, impairing his relationship with his guard and leading to his assassination at the hands of mistreated *viri*. Caligula's bedroom behavior, his irreverence

for marriage and the senate, and his emasculation of leading men contribute to his justified downfall.

III. Claudius

“He (Caligula) would have killed Claudius, had he not felt contempt for him, inasmuch as the latter, partly by his nature and partly by deliberate intent, gave the impression of great stupidity.”²⁵³

Claudius, the fourth Julio-Claudian emperor, is not an overwhelmingly bad figure in Dio’s narrative. However, he is a weak emperor and occupies a similarly ambiguous position like Tiberius. At the outset, there is nothing remarkable about Claudius. He had no real service to the state outside of serving as a consul, and his claim to office was based on his descent from Livia and being Caligula’s uncle. Claudius was a neglected member of the Julio-Claudians, born with defects resembling cerebral palsy. Claudius was an outlier from the good-looking and charming Julio-Claudians that came before him.²⁵⁴ He was neglected, and his bad looks and disabled body placed him on the periphery of power. However, due to Caligula’s assassination, talks of resuming the Republic were running rampant, and it is Claudius whom the Praetorians turn for the office of *princeps*. He had pretended, until now at age 50, that he was like the Brutus who had played stupid until the time was ripe to overthrow the Tarquinius, avoiding death and maintaining a less than illustrious image to keep his life. He escaped Caligula’s murders and

²⁵³ Dio, *Roman History*, 59.23.5.

²⁵⁴ Leon F. Ernestine, “The Imbecillitas of the Emperor Claudius,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 79 (1948): 79–86, 85, 86.

managed to hold the reins of power. Claudius demonstrated quickly that, though he was a slave to the company he kept, his freedmen, and his wives, he was not altogether incompetent and did many good deeds early on. When he assumed power, Claudius spared rebels (60.3.5), abolished treason trials (60.3.6), did not pursue vengeance on those who spoke poorly of him (60.3.7), returned exiles from Caligula's reign (60.4.1), liberated prisoners from the treason trials of Caligula (60.4.2), tried cases personally (60.4.3), and undid the "unjust acts of Caligula (60.5.1)."²⁵⁵ For these things, Claudius was well-liked, but Dio notes that "his freedmen and wife did other things of a different nature."²⁵⁶ Dio's account of the reign of Claudius heavily features behavior of imperial women, which he then uses to assist in establishing the quality of his rule, which appears good at first and then bad once he fails to reign in his household.²⁵⁷

Just like Tiberius, there is a reversal of character after his positive reception, or rather, Claudius enables debauched figures to rule over him and impair his judgment, using sex and wine to undermine his ability to make decisions.²⁵⁸ He does not easily fit the mold of a tyrant or possess tyrannical sexual depravity, rather he embodies an emasculated emperor who allows women to domineer over the Romans, allowing his reign to be mocked because women upended the social order as well as the imperial *domus*. Despite his infirmities, which limit his ability to

²⁵⁵ Dixon Slingerland, "Suetonius 'Claudius' 25.4 and the Account in Cassius Dio," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 79, no. 4 (1989): 305–22, 310.

²⁵⁶ Dio, *Roman History*, 60.8.4.

²⁵⁷ Susan Fischler, "Social Stereotypes and Historical Analysis: The Case of the Imperial Women at Rome," In Archer, L.J., Fischler, S., Wyke, M. (eds) *Women in Ancient Societies*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, (1994): 115–33, 127.

²⁵⁸ Vassiliki Panoussi, "From Adultery to Incest: Messalina and Agrippina as Sexual Aggressors in Tacitus' *Annals*," Sebastian Matzner and Stephen Harrison (Ed.), *Complex Inferiorities: The Poetics of the Weaker Voice in Latin Literature* (pp. 1-19). Oxford University Press, (2018): 9. The Romans believed wine acted as a sexual stimulant on men.

present himself as a strong and masculine Roman man, his condition is not what causes his downfall so much as women and slaves.²⁵⁹ Dio writes:

It was not these infirmities, however, that caused the deterioration of Claudius so much as it was the freedmen and the women with whom he associated; for he, more conspicuously than any of his peers, was ruled by slaves and by women. From a child he had been reared a constant prey to illness and great terror, and for that reason had feigned a stupidity greater than was really the case (a fact that he himself admitted in the senate); and he had lived for a long time with his grandmother Livia and for another long period with his mother Antonia and with the freedmen, and moreover he had had many amours with him. Hence he had acquired none of the qualities befitting a freeman, but, though ruler of all the Romans and their subjects, had become himself a slave. They would take advantage of him particularly when he was inclined to drink or to sexual intercourse, since he applied himself to both these vices insatiably and when so employed was exceedingly easy to master. Moreover, he was afflicted by cowardice, which often so overpowered him that he could not reason out anything as he ought. They seized upon this failing of his, too, to accomplish many of their purposes; for by frightening him they could use him fully for their own ends, and could at the same time inspire the rest with great terror. To give but a single example, once, when a large number of persons were invited to dinner on the same day by Claudius and by these associates, the guests neglected Claudius on one pretense or another, and flocked around the others.²⁶⁰

Claudius is undermined by his slaves and his wives, Messalina and Agrippina, to such an extent that they give the appearance of being the power behind Claudius. His judgment is weak, his ability to rule is compromised, and he is easily won over by sex and wine; sexual excess and cowardly nature would be sure to generate anxiety about Claudius's strength of mind. Claudius is a slave to his vices and the members of his *domus*; Claudius is not the master of his household, an essential characteristic of a true *vir* and emperor. Dio's characterization of the emperor concerning his personal life and decision-making, outside of positive events such as the

²⁵⁹ Slingerland, "Suetonius 'Claudius' 25.4 and the Account in Cassius Dio," 53. Dio is part of a senatorial tradition resembling Tacitus's characterization of Claudius as a fool and a pedant.

²⁶⁰ Dio, *Roman History*, 60.2.4-7.

conquering of Britain, revolves around the machinations of his freedmen and wives, beginning with Messalina. Dio creates an inverted imperial household, where Messalina has the favor of the slaves and influence over the emperor to such an extent she upends political order. As a result, Claudius is a failure as a man. He cannot maintain control over his family, especially his wives, which creates administrative problems and moral disgrace. Messalina, the young and beautiful wife of the deformed and older Claudius, uses her position to usurp the power of the *princeps* and undermine his status as a husband. He becomes a weak man, incapable of demanding or deserving respect. He contributes to the crisis revolving around the institution of the *princeps* and maintaining sole rulership. With Caligula recently removed and Claudius now in power, could he maintain control over the state and act justly? The access to power that was granted to women by a monarchical rule played on the fears of elite men and the idea that the wife of the ruler could endanger the leading class was a tangible threat. With Claudius's rule and his cowardly nature, their fears are realized.

Unfortunately for Claudius, his weakness and vices, his reliance on women and freedmen do little to bolster support for the emerging monarchy, especially because his wives exert too much control over political affairs, which reflects negatively on him. Dio uses Messalina as part of a Roman tradition of ruinous royal adultering that demonstrated the ancient anxiety Roman elites had around imperial women's ability to intrude on the political realm.²⁶¹ The bad sexual behavior causes the victims of her lust to perish as a result of failing to sleep with her or perish because of her jealousies; her intrusion into the political realm is disruptive and causes senators to die. The difficult transition and the ongoing debate amongst Claudius's contemporaries about

²⁶¹ Garrett G. Fagan, "Messalina's Folly," *The Classical Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (2002): 566–79, 568.

the power of the *princeps* is characterized by a weak emperor who is ruled by his freedmen and wives, which results in the mistreatment of senators.²⁶² Dio uses this mistreatment at the hands of a debauched woman to demonstrate how bad Claudius's rule had turned and display, with a historical figure, behaviors to be avoided and a warning to emperors about the power of women.²⁶³ It also demonstrates the anxiety generated by having women so close to the center of power; she could potentially overthrow the balance of power and bring shame onto the imperial house. She should have been excluded from power as a woman, but her influence over Claudius is too great, and she upsets Roman social norms.²⁶⁴

Dio comments frequently on Messalina's control over affairs and her adulterous behavior, attributing the deaths of many men and women to her. It begins with a "series of murders" of leading men that Messalina orchestrates by exercising herself over Claudius and manipulating his cowardly nature. Dio has Messalina, the "most abandoned and lustful of women," demand Gaius Appius Silanus, the governor of Spain, sleep with her. When he refuses, she encourages Claudius to kill him because of a dream in which Silanus plotted on the emperor.²⁶⁵ Messalina's attempted corruption of a leading man through an act of adultery fails, so she uses her weak husband to kill him. In Dio, just as in Tacitus, Messalina's adultery has no limits and becomes the downfall of many men. Dio writes:

²⁶² D. McAlindon, "Senatorial Opposition to Claudius and Nero." *The American Journal of Philology* 77, no. 2 (1956): 113–32, 117.

²⁶³ Sandra Joshel, "Female Desire and the Discourse of Empire: Tacitus's Messalina," *Signs* 21, no. 1 (1995): 50–82, 65.

²⁶⁴ Panoussi, "Adultery to Incest," 6; Fischler, "Imperial Women at Rome," 130. The Roman elite saw women at the center of dynasty order as a threat to their own predominance.

²⁶⁵ D. McAlindon, "Claudius and the Senators," *The American Journal of Philology* 78, no. 3 (1957): 279–86, 279. Claudius put to death more than 35 senators.; Dio, *Roman History*, 60.14.1–4.

In the meantime, Messalina was not only exhibiting her own licentiousness but was also compelling the other women to show themselves equally unchaste. She made many of them commit adultery in the very palace itself while their husbands were present and looked on. Such men she loved and cherished and rewarded them with honours and offices; but others, who would not offer their wives for such business, she hated and brought to destruction in every possible way. These deeds, however, though of such a nature and carried on so openly, for a long time escaped the notice of Claudius; for Messalina took care of him by giving him sundry housemaids to lie with and took care of those who could give him any information by either showing them favors or inflicting punishment upon them.²⁶⁶

Dio demonstrates to the reader that Messalina is the worst of women, truly an inversion of the proper Roman Matron, and becomes, in this instance, like Caligula. Where Caligula had turned the imperial palace into a brothel filled with leading citizens, it is Messalina who inherited his evil sexual exploitation of the leading class, but not for money. It is her lust and sexual desire that causes her to act this way, and as a result, money is not generated, but offices and honors are bestowed. In a sense, she becomes the tyrannical ruler, giving out offices to corrupt favorites and undermining her husband's position by acting in his stead. Even worse, Claudius is presented as totally oblivious, too engaged in his sexual excess with housemaids to realize what is going on in his household. Messalina's behavior is detestable, but it is Claudius' ignorance and vice that enables her. It demonstrates his failure to have authority over his household. It is his sexual excess, his indulging in extramarital sex, that causes him to neglect his duties over his family and in the political realm, such as the bestowing of offices, because women and sex rule over him. Claudius becomes the duped old man and Messalina the cunning adultering wife. Messalina, causing other women to become adulterers, which should have resulted in their punishment, rewards them and their husbands, undermining Roman law and social order through disrespecting the institution of marriage, even subjecting her husband to unknown cuckoldry.

²⁶⁶ Dio, *Roman History*, 60.18.1-3.

Claudius is duped to such an extent that when Messalina seeks to commit adultery with Mnester, the previous favorite of Caligula, and he refuses, she makes Claudius tell Mnester to obey her, pretending it was not for sex.²⁶⁷ Claudius unwittingly condones an adulterous affair. He becomes an unknowing pimp allowing his wife to continue extramarital affairs with his approval. Her unchastity was condoned by the emperor himself, much to Mnesters' shock, and Messalina continues to undermine Claudius's role as *paterfamilias* and emperor. Worse was that Claudius was a Censor and, according to Dio, Claudius was the only one oblivious to his wife's adultery.²⁶⁸ Being the arbiter of morals in Rome while allowing, though it was unbeknownst to him, his wife to commit adultery is hypocritical and undermines the office he wielded.

Messalina was not satisfied with Mnester, her imperial brothel, or the other paramours she had. She caused Marcus Vinicius, a consul, to die because he refused to sleep with her and prevented Sabinus, Caligula's former German Bodyguard Prefect, from being saved from death because she had slept with him. The latter outraged the people and Mnester's failure to perform his duty due to Messalina's keeping of him caused the people to grieve for Claudius, believing he truly did not know what was happening. Dio characterizes their outrage as "vexed at seeing him (Claudius) the slave of his wife and the freedmen" and Messalina's behavior was so "notorious" that "news of it had already traveled to the enemy."²⁶⁹ Why are Claudius' marital problems and the fact that Rome's enemies are aware of it problematic? It demonstrates that the Romans believed Claudius's household, in its chaotic state, indicated he was weak. If Claudius

²⁶⁷ Dio, *Roman History*, 60.22.4-5.

²⁶⁸ Joshel, "Female Desire," 57.

²⁶⁹ Dio, *Roman History*, 60.28.2-4.

could not control his wife, how could he control his subjects and conduct business or diplomacy with other nations?²⁷⁰

Messalina's adulterous behavior, while embarrassing, had not threatened the emperor yet. It was embarrassing, against Roman law, immoral, and created a state of crisis for the political world as Messalina became the arbiter of offices and honors, but Claudius's position remained secure. Messalina is a threatening woman who had turned virtue and society upside-down at a time when the transition to monarchy and absolute rule was fragile.²⁷¹ Messalina's last affair has a chance to undo the rule of her husband, Claudius, and it becomes her undoing. Dio writes,

Messalina, as if it were not enough for her to play the adulteress and harlot, — for in addition to her shameless behavior in general she at times sat as a prostitute in the palace itself and compelled the other women of the highest rank to do the same, — now conceived a desire to have many husbands, that is, men really bearing that title. And she would have been married by a legal contract to all those who enjoyed her favors, had she not been detected and destroyed in her very first attempt. For a time, indeed, all the imperial freedmen had been hand in glove with her and would do nothing except in agreement with her; but when she falsely accused Polybius and caused his death, even while she was maintaining improper relations with him, they no longer trusted her; and thus, having lost their goodwill, she perished. It came about on this wise. She caused Gaius Silius, son of the Silius slain by Tiberius, to be registered as her husband, celebrated the marriage in costly fashion, bestowed a royal residence upon him, in which she had already brought together the most valuable of Claudius' heirlooms; and finally she appointed him consul. Now all these doings, though for some time they had been either heard about or witnessed by everybody else, continued to escape the notice of Claudius. But finally, when he went down to Ostia to inspect the grain supply and she was left behind in Rome on the pretext of being ill, she got up a banquet of no little renown and carried on a most licentious revel. Then Narcissus, having got Claudius by himself, informed him through his concubines of all that was taking place. And by frightening him with the idea that Messalina was going to kill him and set up Silius as ruler in his stead, he persuaded him to arrest and torture a number of persons. While this was going on, the emperor himself hastened back to the city; and immediately upon his arrival he put to death

²⁷⁰ Panoussi, "Adultery to Incest," 2. Sexually aggressive women reverse the norms of female sexuality and agency and makes men's inferiority problematic as the woman in control affects the emperor's ability to manage his *domus* and by extension, his empire.

²⁷¹ Fischler, "Imperial Women at Rome," 119.

Mnester together with many others, and then slew Messalina herself after she had retreated into the gardens of Asiaticus, which more than anything else were the cause of her ruin.²⁷²

Messalina's final affair with Gaius Silius, the consul-designate, resulted in her downfall. Dio makes this act her greatest stroke of *impudicitia* as, more than being a prostitute and adulteress, she actively attempts to take on another husband while married to the emperor. Now, her actions are that of a woman who has escaped the control of her husband, the foremost man in Rome, and actively sought a man who could replace him as husband and, perhaps, as ruler. Her adultery generated a real crisis. Outside of undermining Roman gender roles, marriage, and law, she actively created a conspiracy. The wedding, royal residence, and banquet all suggest a weak plot that lacked planning, but in the hands of Narcissus, Claudius's trusted freedman, the act becomes far more sinister than a divorce and remarriage; it becomes a plot for Silius to become emperor. Silius, whether he wanted to be emperor or not, had to accept Messalina's marriage.²⁷³ He was aware that refusing her would ruin his career. Though accepting could also ruin his career or end his life, he decided to let the situation unfold, which inevitably resulted in his death. Silius was another victim of Messalina, a pawn used by a woman.²⁷⁴ Whether Messalina had a political goal, or it was a passionate affair is irrelevant. The simple fact is that Messalina engaged in an action that the Principate as an "institution could not tolerate."²⁷⁵ Messalina's taking a lover and betraying her husband had political and public consequences. She had taken an outsider into the imperial bedroom and, therefore, the heart of the dynasty. Her lover, another

²⁷² Dio, *Roman History*, 60.31.1-6.

²⁷³ Fagan, "Messalina's Folly," 566.

²⁷⁴ Joshel, "Female Desire," 56. Female lust is often explained in terms of political manipulation. Women are either the passive victim or active villains.

²⁷⁵ Fagan, "Messalina's Folly," 575.

elite man, could have the ability to usurp Claudius and threaten the current emperor's position. Her adultery, whether from personal desire or political maneuvering, was always considered a public act, treasonous and deserving of punishment. Her moral failing and Claudius's inability to prevent the affair from occurring demonstrate disruptive internal events for the imperial family and are characteristic of a brewing crisis.²⁷⁶ She became the head of a corrupt household and used her status as wife to pursue her sexual desires.²⁷⁷ Claudius appears as "passive, befuddled, and incapable of independent actions" while the senators had simply become objects of "female desire," who are used and discarded.²⁷⁸ Furthermore, her acts of adultery and marriage suggested that power lay outside the emperor himself in addition to her usurpation of political decisions, such as the promotion of men to offices.²⁷⁹

The situation is even more ironic given that Messalina's infidelity is only exposed by Claudius's concubines and his slaves and that he did not discover her adulterous behavior until this point reflects the real power behind Claudius's throne; concubines, at the direction of imperial freedmen, become the reason for Claudius's action, not Claudius himself.²⁸⁰ Messalina, acting as a prostitute and adulteress, becomes *infamis*, and her final action is the ultimate representation of that status. Her behavior had resulted in the top of society becoming the bottom with an adulterous wife whose desire created disorder in the *domus* and social hierarchy.²⁸¹ Her adultery can go no further, and her pursuit of her lustful desires, whether a part of her character or part of a political plot, causes her downfall. The crisis should be enough of a motivating factor

²⁷⁶ Fagan, "Messalina's Folly," 579.

²⁷⁷ Panoussi, "Adultery to Incest," 3.

²⁷⁸ Joshel, "Female Desire," 55.

²⁷⁹ Fischler, "Imperial Women at Rome," 124.

²⁸⁰ Fagan, "Messalina's Folly," 569.

²⁸¹ Joshel, "Female Desire," 59.

for Claudius to seize control over his household and throne. However, it is not Claudius that spurs the action; it is Narcissus. Claudius, still an emasculated man, is spurred to action by his freedmen and concubines, not of his own accord. His *virtus*, his manly strength, is subsumed by those around him, acting for him. Claudius is still not in control over his marriage, the crisis, or his household. Dio is implying that Claudius's freedmen dominate him even with the central figure that has caused executions of leading men and shame on his *domus* out of the picture. His *domus* had become determined by his wife and freedmen, and he did not appear in a position to control it.²⁸² The reader, as well as the contemporaries of Claudius, would have been disgusted by this. Being domineered over by a freedman, whether the former *puer* of the emperor or not, was shameful; the implied sexual penetrability of Narcissus made him a figure of enmity.

Furthermore, his family, which was supposed to serve as a symbol of prestige and honor, becomes a threat to the safety of the state, filled with overzealous freedmen and an adulterous wife that undermined her husband's role as head of the household. Messalina's final refusal to be subject to her husband indicated Claudius's general lack of oversight over his wife, a "woman gone bad" who had many lovers, and created a crisis that Claudius could have prevented had he exercised his manly role instead of indulging in vices and submitting to his freedmen and wife. It is ironic that where other male emperors have inherited the vices or evil of the previous, it is Messalina who inherits their bad behavior, engaging in prostitution, adultery, undermining the political role of Claudius, and establishing an imperial brothel, like Caligula. Claudius's trust and affection for his wife and her clouding of his judgment through her wiles (she was a pretty young woman, and he was an old man after all) or fulfillment of his sexual desires through concubines

²⁸² Panoussi, "Adultery to Incest," 8.

caused him to neglect his duties or perform them poorly while she undermined him. He allowed a woman to influence his political decisions. Claudius is emasculated, and Messalina takes on a more masculine and commanding role, fulfilling her lusts, enacting political decisions, and undermining the office of *princeps*. Claudius becomes an archetypal emasculated man, kowtowing to his wife and freedmen; he is an inverted *vir* and fails to control his wife.

Messalina's death is not only justified because of her adulterous liaisons but, as I have mentioned elsewhere, her undermining of the office of *princeps* and upending of Roman politics. Dio thought it especially unbecoming of Claudius to allow his wife to seize control over numerous affairs that Claudius or the Senate should have presided over. Messalina enabled the execution of many men and women (60.16.1), sold citizenship to foreigners (60.17.5), sold military commands, procuratorships, and governorships (60.17.8), had two consuls put to death (60.27.4, 60.29.5-6), and had Claudius's two sons-in-laws put to death. Messalina exerted too much power over her husband and Roman politics, and, as a result, created an inverted political order led by an inverted Roman woman, not the ideal passive Roman Matron (not to say that Julio-Claudian women were passive in general). Her sexual desire enabled violence and the execution of many elite men.²⁸³ Messalina's final act of adultery is only the final crisis demonstrating the derailment of society by Claudius's household, with an ineffectual emperor in the background. Still, Dio is not overly critical of Claudius, but mainly his wife. The real issue is the execution of senators, Messalina's usurpation of power, and how it reflects on the emperor. Dio uses Messalina to criticize Claudius's rule, though he acknowledges some good deeds of the emperor. Thus, it is hard to demonstrate Claudius as a tyrant, and it is more accurate to say that

²⁸³ Joshel, "Female Desire," 61.

he enabled tyrannical behavior in his wife, which emasculates him and makes his control over the state waver. He is weak, not a tyrant, and his weakness gives rise to powerful freedmen and women that should not have been able to wield the power they did. Sex and power are tied together in Claudius; his sexual desires obscure the behavior of his wife, whose sexual desires emerge from the imperial bedroom into public life, corrupting leading men and women while casting a shadow over Claudius's ability to rule by usurping aspects of his office and bestowing power on those willing to commit acts worthy of the lowest *infamis*. Messalina's power allows her to defy the rules of marriage and reverse gender and social hierarchies while destroying her familial relations in attempting to replace her husband.²⁸⁴ The audience understand that behind the closed doors of the imperial palace, imperial women could be able to dictate the decisions of her husband. As a result, Dio's narrative is plausible and follows a tradition that shows senatorial anxiety around women who wield too much control due to proximity to the emperor.²⁸⁵

Messalina is not the final bad actor in Dio's depiction of Claudius's reign. Messalina's removal from the heart of power only allows another woman, considerably worse because she is more cunning, to take her place. Agrippina, the infamous incestuous and adulterous sister of Caligula, enters the narrative again by acting "more familiar in her conduct toward him (Claudius) than became a niece."²⁸⁶ Agrippina, upon her return from exile, had played her cards well and stayed near the seat of power. With Messalina out of the way she could make her move. Dio has Claudius's freedmen bring about this marriage, with Claudius not acting on his own accord once again. Dio writes:

²⁸⁴ Panoussi, "Adultery to Incest," 5.

²⁸⁵ Fischler, "Imperial Women at Rome," 121.

²⁸⁶ Dio, *Roman History*, 60.30.6.

The freedmen zealously aided in bringing about this marriage, since Agrippina had a son, Domitius, who was already nearing man's estate, and they wished to bring him up as Claudius' successor in the imperial office so that they might suffer no harm at the hands of Britannicus for having caused the death of his mother, Messalina. When, however, the marriage had been decided upon, they feared Silanus, who was honoured as an upright man by Claudius, and at the same time they wished to secure Octavia, the emperor's daughter, already betrothed to Silanus, as wife for Agrippina's son, Domitius. So they persuaded Claudius to put Silanus to death, claiming that he was plotting against him. When this had been accomplished, Vitellius made a speech in the senate, declaring that the good of the State required that Claudius should marry; and he kept indicating Agrippina as a suitable woman for this purpose and advised them to force him into this marriage. Thus prompted, the senators came to Claudius and made a show of compelling him to marry. They also passed a decree permitting Romans to wed their nieces, a union previously prohibited.²⁸⁷

Claudius's marriage to his niece, Agrippina, is portrayed as forced on him and something he did not pursue. The incestuous relationship breaks Roman law and causes Claudius to break the law by marrying his niece. Claudius's sexual depravity, his incestuous relationship with his niece, causes the law to be altered to allow for such a relationship. It demonstrates Claudius being manipulated by his freedmen and a new wife, showing his weakness. As Agrippina entered the palace, she "gained complete control over Claudius" and usurped his power by winning over his freedmen and followers to do her bidding.²⁸⁸ She surpasses Messalina in that her sexual behavior is characterized not by her depravity. She was already an adulterer and had an incestuous relationship with her brother, but she surpasses her in cunning to be able to insert herself and Nero into the center of power. Dio remarks that "she exercised the same power as Claudius; she desired to have his title outright."²⁸⁹ Agrippina and her eventual murder of Claudius are Dio's final remarks on Claudius, demonstrating that by allowing his wives and

²⁸⁷ Dio, *Roman History*, 60.31.8.

²⁸⁸ Dio, *Roman History*, 60.32.1-2.

²⁸⁹ Dio, *Roman History*, 60.33.12.

freedmen to rule over him, he was open to their betrayal. He could not command his household and remained oblivious to the plot against him, resulting in his death. The shift from Messalina to Agrippina, who is more cunning and powerful, demonstrates a decline of empire where women of the court also decline and destroy hierarchies of gender, society, and the political realm.

Claudius's rule and his early acts become subsumed in a narrative that focuses on women more than men. The audience would recognize that Claudius nearly disappears from his own reign with the freedmen and his wives often acting for him or undermining his decisions. He is an emasculated emperor who is a coward and easily manipulated through his choice vices, sex, and wine. Messalina, his third wife, is an adulterous nymphomaniac who upsets the political order and the social order, cuckolding her husband and committing treason. Her adulterous behavior is unbecoming of her rank and she becomes more of a man than Claudius, controlling promotions and the extension of citizenship. Agrippina, his fourth wife, seizes her opportunity for power more readily, inserting herself and Nero into the line of succession and removing Claudius's bloodline (Britannicus) from power. Their marriage even causes Roman law to be rewritten so they can be legally married. Claudius's submission to women brings shame to his office, undermines male political control, contravenes Roman law, reverses marital roles, and leads to many senators' deaths. For women who have turned bad, to usurp control and cloud the emperor's judgment is characteristic of a crisis. In the aftermath of Caligula's death there was serious debate about the merits of a monarchy and the elite class was considering attempting to return to the Republic. Claudius managing to secure power, the subsequent bad behavior of his wives, and the death of many senators characterizes that the state was, internally, still in crisis and the transition to an absolute monarchy in a precarious position. Claudius's reign did not

sooth the tensions around his position and his failure to control the women in his life is representative of his inability to fully exercise control over the state. His *domus* imperils the Roman world, corrupting leading men and promoting undeserving individuals to power. Claudius is not a tyrant, but his wives are tyrannical, and their use of sex to control him and other men casts a shadow over his reign. The audience would recognize that Claudius was not man enough to control the Roman world and his wives controlled the political world more than they should have been able to. Messalina and Agrippina have more of a role in shaping the portrayal of his reign than he does.

IV. Nero

“Finally, he lost all shame, dashed to the ground and trampled underfoot all their precepts, and began to follow in the footsteps of Gaius. And when he had once concerned a desire to emulate him, he quite surpassed him; for he held it to be one of the obligations of the imperial power not to fall behind anybody else even in the basest deeds.”²⁹⁰

The final Julio-Claudian, Nero, is the most spectacular in his terrible deeds and behaviors compared to his predecessors in Dio’s *Roman History*. Nero represents the culmination of the basest deeds of his family wrapped into one emperor’s sadistic and depraved reign. Nero is undoubtedly the worst and an emperor who, while cunning, was an intentionally cruel and “theatrically motivated individual who ruled according to his indulgences.”²⁹¹ Dio does not

²⁹⁰ Dio, *Roman History*, 61.5.1.

²⁹¹ Zoie A. Dean, “Rome & Her Greatest Theatric: The Controversies of Emperor Nero,” *Tenor of Our Times* 12, article 15 (2023): 81–118, 82.

highlight anything particularly beneficial of Nero's reign and immediately impresses on the reader that Nero was destined for infamy. Dio writes that Nero's own father, Domitius, foresaw the nature of his son and proclaimed that "it is impossible for any good man to be sprung from me and this woman (Agrippina)." ²⁹² When Nero ascended to his position as *princeps* he was content to leave affairs in the hands of his mother and his two advisors, Seneca and Sextus Burrus, while indulging in idleness and vice. While administering the affairs of the empire, they made a fatal mistake in believing that Nero would be content to live in luxury and not disturb the public interest or the affairs of the state. ²⁹³ By this point in the narrative and to the audience reading, it is painfully clear that the emperor's personal life and behavior will eventually collide with his administrative ability, and because Nero was young, unrestrained, and above all Roman officials, he could only become more daring and vile as a result of his delusion that the public business could not be handled worse as a result of his actions, which was a delusion fed by his advisors. Dio indicates that for a time, it did appear as though Nero's personality was subdued to an extent, as other historians point out a period of stable rule until Nero decided to follow his vices on grander scales. Dio does not focus on this tamer period of his rule and instead focuses on the mismanagement of the empire due to his effeminate nature, his sexual inversion, his relationship with his mother, and other general bad behavior that builds up to his suicide. Dio describes Nero's cunning or subversive nature that allowed him to fool his advisors and mother by pretending to behave virtuously, and then immediately after they had admonished him for bad behavior, he would "again become the slave of his desire and yield to those who were leading

²⁹² Dio, *Roman History*, 61.2.3.

²⁹³ Dio, *Roman History*, 61.4.2-3.

him in the other direction since they were dragging him downhill.”²⁹⁴ Dio goes as far as to say that he:

practiced his vices at home and among his associates, but afterwards even indulged them publicly. Thus he brought great disgrace upon the whole Roman race and committed many outrages against the Romans themselves. Innumerable acts of violence and outrage, of robbery and murder, were committed by the emperor himself and by those who at one time or another had influence with him.²⁹⁵

At the outset of Nero’s reign, signs of what would come were already present. Nero was a “slave” to his vices, surrounded himself with associates unfit for the *princeps*, and neglected affairs of the state in favor of his two trusted advisors and, to an extent, his mother, who has already been discussed as a domineering influence over Claudius and an ambitious woman who could damage the state. Initially, Nero’s sexual proclivities are not the focus, but when considering the details Dio provides at the beginning, it is not hard to imagine what behavior will follow from a young man with many amours, a love for *luxuria*, and who is enslaved to his vices. The several key details or events that Dio elaborates on when describing the effeminate or sexually deviant behavior of the emperor and its consequences are his relationship with his mother, his appearance, his nighttime revels, his marriages, and his associates. It is important to state that Nero was a fairly popular ruler amongst the “people.” His first five years as emperor were not as out-of-control as sources describe his later years, and those sources that do discuss Nero’s actions are from an elite background, whom Nero offended the most.

Nero’s incestuous relationship with his mother is undoubtedly one of the most famous presentations of the monstrous personalities of mother and son. It is recorded many times in

²⁹⁴ Dio, *Roman History*, 61.4.4.

²⁹⁵ Dio, *Roman History*, 61.5.2-3.

Roman historiography and is used as *exemplum* of Nero's sexual deviance. It also is a tale that surpasses Claudius's incestuous relationship with Agrippina and makes it more abhorrent. Dio records several relevant excerpts describing Agrippina's behavior and relationship with Nero to construct his tyrannical portrait of Nero. Agrippina was an ambitious woman, she had inserted herself into a position of power as Claudius's wife and then, through assassination, ensured her son would also hold the supreme power. As Dio would have the reader believe, Agrippina did not stop there. She continuously exercised influence over her son by appointing Seneca and Burrus, admonishing Nero like a child, and attempting to manage or interfere with public business. Dio writes that at first, "Agrippina managed for him all the business of the empire," she assassinated Marcus Junius Silanus, and she raised money from the "most trivial and basest sources."²⁹⁶ Clearly, she had inserted herself into a position of influence. The threat of a domineering woman who controls the emperor and leading men is a tangible possibility for the reader and a problem for the emperor because she undermines his role and creates uncertainty about his ability to manage affairs. Dio even describes her as the "mistress of affairs in the palace."²⁹⁷ Beyond claiming that Agrippina was a threat or undermined the emperor, how does Dio indicate this is the case to the reader? Dio cites the example of the arrival of an Armenian delegation by writing that:

Agrippina wished to mount the tribunal from which Nero was talking with them. The two men (Burrus and Seneca), seeing her approach, persuaded the young man to descend and meet his mother before she could get there, as if to extend some special greeting to her. Then, having brought this about, they did not re-ascend the tribunal, but made some excuse, so that the weakness in the empire should not become apparent to the foreigners; and thereafter they labored to prevent any public business from being again committed to her hands.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁶ Dio, *Roman History*, 61.3.2; 61.6.4-5.

²⁹⁷ Dio, *Roman History*, 61.7.1.

²⁹⁸ Dio, *Roman History*, 61.3.3-4.

Agrippina had inserted herself and attempted to obtain visible power and influence in an unacceptable way for a woman, even for the emperor's mother. Her presence in the imperial court was destabilizing because the Roman elite viewed it as emasculating their authority and power or a woman acting as a rival for power, especially as she was cultivating Praetorian support.²⁹⁹ No woman, not even the emperor's mother, should receive foreign delegations or handle imperial affairs. It indicates a poor ruler who has allowed himself to submit to others, notably a woman, in his administration of the empire. Agrippina's proximity to power and her influence over Nero, which he came to hate her for, also sparked other rumors, like those that Suetonius and others have recorded, of an intimate and unnatural sexual relationship. Dio records that:

Agrippina, therefore, fearing that Nero would marry the woman (Sabina) (for he was now beginning to entertain a mad passion for her), ventured upon a most unholy course. As if it were not notoriety enough for her that she had used her blandishments and immodest looks and kisses to enslave even Nero in similar fashion. Whether this actually occurred, now, or whether it was invented to fit their character, I am not sure; but I state as a fact what is admitted by all, that Nero had a mistress resembling Agrippina of whom he was especially fond because of this very resemblance, and when he toyed with the girl herself or displayed her charms to others, he would say that he was wont to have intercourse with his mother.³⁰⁰

Unlike other Roman historians, Dio allows readers to draw their own conclusions about the incestuous relationship between mother and son. He remarks on the attributes of Agrippina that he found most prevalent, her sexuality, to rule over Nero in a similar way to how she held power over Claudius; however, he is skeptical whether this occurred. He suggests that it is

²⁹⁹ Trevor Luke, "From Crisis to Consensus: Salutary Ideology and the Murder of Agrippina," *Illinois Classical Studies*, no. 38 (2013): 207-228, 210.

³⁰⁰ Dio, *Roman History*, 61.11.3-4.

possible it did not occur but provides the reader with Nero's actions that may suggest that the rumors are true. Obviously, an incestuous relationship between mother and son is *stuprum* and unnatural. However, there is a larger concept at work. As argued earlier, those who were close to the emperor, especially those viewed by the elite as unfit for power, were often assumed to have some sort of sexual connection to the *princeps*. It was difficult for the lower classes and the elite alike to envision a world where Agrippina managed affairs and controlled her son without having a sexual connection to him; why else would the emperor submit his control over affairs? This view, increasingly prevalent during the 3rd century A.D. when Dio was writing, underlies the entire discussion. Another interpretation of Nero stating he was "wont to have intercourse with his mother" could mean that Nero was mimicking the dream of Julius Caesar, who dreamt of intercourse with his mother before setting off to win his civil war. Romans believed that such dreams were good omens and meant victory and the attainment of power, however, because Nero was cruel and twisted, he could have been openly acknowledging that such an affair between him and his mother did really exist and was poking fun at the idea of a good omen.³⁰¹ Regardless of whether the incestuous relationship occurred or was essentially Roman historical canon by the third century, it represents the idea that a tyrant and his associates have some unnatural relationship that explains their position. Earlier in Book LXI, Dio invites this belief and demonstrates that proximity to the emperor and rumors of sexual contact are joined together. Dio writes that:

He also used the same excuse in the case of his mother; for he would not allow any soldier to attend her, declaring that no one except the emperor ought to be guarded by them. This revealed even to the masses his hatred of her. Nearly everything, to be sure, that he and his mother said to each other or that they did each day was reported outside the palace, yet it did not all reach the public, and

³⁰¹ Edward Champlin, "Nero Reconsidered," *New England Review* 19, no.2 (1998): 97–108, 101.

hence various conjectures were made and various stories circulated. For, in view of the depravity and lewdness of the pair, everything that could conceivably happen was noised abroad as having actually taken place, and reports possessing any credibility were believed as true. But when the people now saw Agrippina unaccompanied for the first time by the Praetorians, most of them took care not to fall in with her even by accident; and if anyone did chance to meet her, he would hastily get out of the way without saying a word.³⁰²

Nero's close relationship or appearance with his mother had caused numerous rumors to be circulated, many of them were believed as entirely plausible because of Agrippina's privileges. She managed affairs and, before their removal, had a Praetorian escort, a privilege usually reserved for the emperor. Dio again suggests that because both were lewd and depraved, any sexual relationship was believable, and even the people, because of the proximity of an individual to the imperial power, readily believed that an incestuous relationship was occurring. While the main subject of the excerpt is Agrippina's fall from grace with Nero, the idea that a sexual relationship existed because of her relationship with Nero and the imperial administration reinforces the point that it was readily believed the emperor's associates, especially those who were considered unfavorable or depraved, had some sexual relationship to him. Furthermore, her removal was necessary (to Nero and his advisors) because she was using her sexual prowess to keep Nero in check as she attempted to usurp his royal inheritance and put the state under the tyranny of a woman.³⁰³ Even the aftermath of Agrippina's death had a sexual undertone. Dio writes that:

Nero, when informed that she was dead, would not believe it, since the deed was so monstrous that he was overwhelmed by incredulity; he therefore desired to behold the victim of his crime with his own eyes. So he laid bare her body, looked her all over and inspected her wounds, finally uttering a remark far more

³⁰² Dio, *Roman History*, 61.8.4-6.

³⁰³ Champlin. "Nero Reconsidered," 100.

abominable even than the murder. His words were: “I did not know I had such a beautiful mother.”³⁰⁴

Dio’s focus on her naked body and Nero’s “monstrous” remark implies to the reader that Nero is reminiscing on their unnatural relationship. It could almost indicate to the reader some twisted priestly role (Pontifex Maximus), in which Nero is performing an *extispicium* over his mother. Even though that is unlikely to be the case, Dio finds something sinister about the situation. It is likely that it is not Nero’s sexual deviance or desire that is on display but his dark humor. His matricide (Nero had ordered his mother’s death and pretended to not know of it) and viewing of his dead mother draw similarities to Euripides *Bacchae*, and Nero’s theatrical personality and familiarity with plays was the concerning element: he masked his personality in the guise of a play, making himself an actor and almost indifferent to his parricide.³⁰⁵ Either way, his relationship and murder of his mother reversed the proper relationship between parent and child and created a crime fitting enough to disrupt the *Pax deorum* of Rome.³⁰⁶

While renowned for its suspected depravity, Nero’s relationship with his mother is not as salacious as his notorious revels and nighttime escapades. In a few excerpts, Dio sheds light on Nero’s character and behavior, which is anything but how the *princeps* should behave. Nero frequented taverns, brothels, theatrical performances, banquets, and gladiatorial games on a grand scale, outraging many of the elite Romans in the process; Dio compared his behavior and appearance to that of a “private citizen.”³⁰⁷ Dio describes how Nero went about the city, “insulting women, practicing lewdness on boys, stripping the people whom he encountered,

³⁰⁴ Dio, *Roman History*, 61.14.2.

³⁰⁵ Barry Baldwin, “Nero and His Mother’s Corpse,” *Mnemosyne* 4, no. 32 (1972): 380–81, 380.

³⁰⁶ Luke, “From Crisis to Consensus,” 212, 217.

³⁰⁷ Dio, *Roman History*, 61.8.1.

beating, wounding, and murdering. He had an idea that his identity was not known, for he used various costumes and different wigs at different time.”³⁰⁸ Nero’s actions are reprehensible, especially the practice of “lewdness on boys” which I interpret as some form of sexual contact. Though the status of the boys is unknown, if any were freeborn, given Nero’s later actions, some undoubtedly were, Nero was committing an atrocious form of *stuprum*, in which a young man was treated as a *puer* rather than a true freeborn citizen. Nero was operating outside of the respectable targets for his sexual desires. Insulting women, stripping people, beating, wounding, and murdering are just additional fodder for casting Nero as an unrestrained tyrant. The beatings, much like the assault on boys, are also an assault on the *libertas* of the Roman citizen and, if freeborn, violated their “inviolable” bodily autonomy. All of these were crimes worthy of punishment, but Nero as *Princeps* was beyond reproach. The final offense, wearing costumes and wigs, also damages Nero’s character. Nero’s lack of restraint is engendered by his effeminate leaning towards acting and actors, the lowest social class of Rome. It would appear that Nero “confused role-playing and acting” to such an extent that some sources, such as Suetonius, portray Nero’s reign as a sort of “grand opera.”³⁰⁹ The depraved behavior is only enhanced by picturing Nero in his garb, misbehaving, and pretending he is a member of the rabble, not the emperor. Dio discusses Nero’s tyrannous acts by going into greater detail about how Nero and his associates, or rather his enablers, outraged the Roman elite. Dio writes of Nero and Tigellinus (Prefect of the Praetorians):

would also enter the brothels and without let or hindrance have intercourse with any of the women who were seated there, among whom were the most beautiful and distinguished in the city, both slaves and free, courtesans and virgins and

³⁰⁸ Dio, *Roman History*, 61.9.2.

³⁰⁹ Susan A. Curry, “Nero *Quadripes*: Animalizing the Emperor in Suetonius’s *Nero*,” *Arethusa* 47, no 2. (2014): 197–230, 197–98.

married women; and these were not merely of the common people but also of the very noblest families, both girls and grown women. Every man had the privilege of enjoying whichever one he wished, as the women were not allowed to refuse anyone. Consequently, indiscriminate rabble as the throng was, they not only drank greedily but also wantoned riotously; and now a slave would debauch his mistress in the presence of his master, and now a gladiator would debauch a girl of noble family before the eyes of her father. The pushing and fighting and general uproar that took place, both on the part of those who were actually going in and on the part of those who were standing around outside, were disgraceful. Many men met their death in these encounters, and many women, too, some of the latter being suffocated and some being seized and carried off.³¹⁰

The passage bears a striking resemblance to Caligula's imperial brothel but with an important difference. Whereas Caligula's actions took place in view of the elite and behind the locked doors of the imperial residence, Nero's actions are on full display for the people to see and, even worse, relish in. Nero's behavior threatens the fabric of Roman society because the *Princeps*, rather than being the first among men, is simply one of the men, and a depraved one at that. He displayed himself in public like a gladiator or prostitute and rendered himself "*indignus*, or slave-like and criminal-like, becoming a criminal on the streets of Rome."³¹¹ His actions are explicitly sexual in their characterization. Nero is a visitor of brothels staffed by the unwilling matrons, noble women, and young girls of the Roman elite. His rape, adultery, and orgiastic luxury are on full display for normal citizens to see and elite Roman *viri* to suffer through by watching their wives and daughters become unwilling prostitutes in the service of the emperor and his entourage; it is made worse by the participation of members of lower social classes that are enabled to rape at will and with the consent of the emperor; Nero threatened the social order of the Roman world by allowing unbridled sexual depravity. In an environment where gladiators could assault young girls in front of their fathers and slaves assault their masters' wives, the

³¹⁰ Dio, *Roman History*, 62.15.4-6.

³¹¹ Curry, "Nero *Quadripes*," 207.

fabric of social status was eroded by lustful depravity. Fathers suffered *injuria* because of female family members being assaulted and had their status as *viri* negated by being unable to protect their family and status. The sexual contact alone inverted the norm as members of society who were prevented from marriage and sexual relations satiated their desires in the presence of the *Princeps*, who relished in the outrageous actions. Nero became the pimp who prostituted other noble wives and daughters, showing his utter contempt for the Roman elite. Women were murdered or carried off, *raptio*, without punishment because Nero willfully descended into moral and sexual depravity. What took place in Rome's streets, taverns, and brothels should have been enough to condemn any man within the law.

It was not just Nero's nighttime revels and assaults that drew the ire of the Roman elite, but also how he conducted himself in his marriages, which are recorded by Dio anachronistically. Nero had many amours from slaves such as Acte to noblewomen like Sabina, but he was most notorious for his final two "marriages" to a freedman named Pythagoras and a young man he castrated and married named Sporus. Nero's first marriage to his stepsister, Octavia, ended in divorce because of his affection for his concubine, Sabina. Not only did Nero divorce Octavia, but he also had her murdered, committing the monstrous crime of uxoricide.³¹² Obviously, the divorce and murder of his royal wife, the daughter of Claudius, offended the Roman elite, especially his advisors, who urged against such action, but Nero was already spiraling out of control. His marriage to Octavia helped solidify his rule as she was a direct descendant of the previous emperor; however, by divorcing her, he forfeited a powerful element

³¹² Dio, *Roman History*, 62.13.1.

in solidifying his claim to the Principate. His relationship with Sabina, his “true” love, was also in poor taste and deviant. Dio writes:

There was a certain Marcus Salvius Otho, who had become so intimate with Nero through the similarity of their character and their companion-ship in crime that he was not even punished for saying to him one day, As truly as you may expect to see me Caesar!” All that he got for it was the response: “I shall not see you even consul.” It was to him that the emperor gave Sabina, a woman of patrician family, after separating her from her husband,¹ and they both enjoyed her together.³¹³

The irony that Otho later becomes emperor for a short time is not lost on the reader, but that they shared the same woman after separating her from Otho is bizarre. Nero committed adultery, then Otho did the same when he was no longer her husband, a mutual three-way adulterous affair. A bizarre set of events demonstrates how lustful Nero was while also denigrating his successor as being like-minded. The affair was made worse because Nero had divorced Octavia for Sabina and then did not enjoy pure matrimony but a lustful adulterous relationship. Unfortunately for Sabina, Nero later accidentally, or intentionally, killed her in a fit of rage, stomping on her stomach while she was pregnant.³¹⁴ Dio does not mention Nero’s third marriage to Statilia Messalina for unknown reasons.

Despite Nero’s controversial spouse murdering and womanizing, which is part of the standard tyrannical *topoi*, it is his sexually inverted marriages that caused the most outrage and disgust. When Sabina died, Nero became obsessed with her memory, projecting their relationship and her beauty onto another woman who resembled her until he laid his eyes upon a boy from his imperial freedmen. In three excerpts, Dio writes:

[1] But later he caused a boy of the freedmen, whom he used to call Sporus, to be castrated, since he, too, resembled Sabina, and he used him in every way like a wife. In due time, though already “married” to Pythagoras, a freedman, he

³¹³ Dio, *Roman History*, 61.11.2

³¹⁴ Dio, *Roman History*, 62.27.4.

formally “married” Sporus, and assigned the boy a regular dowry according to contract; and the Romans as well as others publicly celebrated their wedding.³¹⁵

[2] While Nero had Sporus, the eunuch, as a wife, one of his associates in Rome, who had made a study of philosophy, on being asked whether the marriage and cohabitation in question met with his approval, replied: “You do well, Caesar, to seek the company of such wives. Would that your father had had the same ambition and had lived with a similar consort!” — indicating that if this had been the case, Nero would not have been born, and the state would now be free of great evils.³¹⁶

[3] Now Nero called Sporus “Sabina” not merely because, owing to his resemblance to her he had been made a eunuch, but because the boy, like the mistress, had been solemnly married to him in Greece, Tigellinus giving the bride away, as the law ordained. All the Greeks held a celebration in honour of their marriage, uttering all the customary good wishes, even to the extent of praying that legitimate children might be born to them. After that Nero had two bedfellows at once, Pythagoras to play the role of husband to him, and Sporus that of wife. The latter, in addition to other forms of address, was termed “lady,” “queen,” and “mistress.” Yet why should one wonder at this, seeing that Nero would fasten naked boys and girls to stakes, and then putting on the hide of a wild beast would attack them and satisfy his brutal lust under the appearance of devouring parts of their bodies? Such were the indecencies of Nero.³¹⁷

Nero’s “marriage” to Sporus begins with his castration to make him like a woman, or since he was described as a boy, a *puer delicatus*. Nero’s marriage and sexual relationship with Sporus, now a eunuch, was unnatural because Nero was indulging in a form of *luxuria* and unrestrained desire; the sexual relationship produced no heir and only fulfilled lustful desires. Since Sporus was not a slave when castrated but a *libertus*, an ex-slave, he should have been prevented from genital mutilation altogether, and his status as a freedman being revoked in favor of making him a *puer* is just as legally problematic.³¹⁸ Nero should not have been legally able to

³¹⁵ Dio, *Roman History*, 62.28.2-3.

³¹⁶ Dio, *Roman History*, 62.25.3a.

³¹⁷ Dio, *Roman History*, 63.13.1-3.

³¹⁸ Michael B. Charles, “Nero and Sporus Again,” *Latomus* 73, no.3 (2014): 667–85, 668.

marry a male slave.³¹⁹ It was even more sickening for the elite that he paraded Sporus around in the image of his murdered wife. Nero's emasculation of Sporus was also a monstrous crime to the Romans. A boy who was forever unable to become a man, incapable of reproducing, and bound to the emperor in a legal marriage to be an object of his sexual perversions, the *genius* of Nero was inverted or turned into a mockery. It was pure insanity and removed from the "reality demanded by his imperial position, to have a boy as a wife rather than a noblewoman was forsaking his imperial duty to produce an heir and substituting it with personal pleasure."³²⁰ The first excerpt also mentions Pythagoras, to whom Nero had also "married." Not only did Nero emasculate another man and contravene sexual norms with Sporus, but he had done the same to himself by having a marriage to a man in which he played the submissive role. It is hard to decipher which marriage the elite would have been more outraged over and which could possibly imperil the Roman world more. I only argue that both must have been equally egregious. Dio's use of quotations on marriage in both parts of the first excerpt indicates disdain and a mocking tone toward the situation. In the second excerpt, Dio includes the opinion of Nero's associates, which is really his own thoughts, and remarks that he essentially wished Nero had never been born and that the "marriages" were causing harm to the state. Nero parodied proper marital relations, chose unacceptable partners, and flaunted it before the respectable classes. The reader would have recalled that this behavior was typical of Nero, in fact, his corrupt associates and advisors, among whom Dio believes Seneca to have been, enabled Nero to fulfill his lusts. Dio

³¹⁹ Bremert, "Sex in Suetonius," 97.

³²⁰ Bremert, "Sex in Suetonius," 97.

writes that Seneca's licentiousness paired with his "delight that he took in boys past their prime, a practice he also taught Nero to follow."³²¹

The final excerpt, three, is a further condemnation of Nero's sexual deviance. He is confirmed as the submissive sexual partner to Pythagoras, a freedman, and the husband to Sporus, a castrated boy, both of which were offensive. Pythagoras, as husband, could wield influence over Nero because of his sexual domination, or Nero could be viewed as yielding to another man, a former slave, in public affairs. Sporus, as his wife, could receive undue influence in political matters or imperial affairs because he was a corrupt favorite of the emperor. His actions are an odd spectacle, especially considering the apparent genuine wishes for children to be born to Nero and another man, highlighting the affair's absurdity. But the final remark made regarding Nero's marriages is that such behavior was expected or no longer surprising considering the sexual assaults he performed on boys and girls.³²² The "devouring" of "parts of their bodies" undoubtedly refers to Nero performing oral sex on them. While oral sex was not exactly deviant, it was disgusting to the Romans. The mouth, a "pure" part of the body that controlled what went in and out, from food to words, was not to be corrupted and seen as an important instrument in directing the state's political affairs. In violating the youth with his mouth, Nero degrades himself and the tool (his mouth) that he should be using to administer political affairs. With Nero defiling this tool, why should it be any surprise that he defiled himself in the royal bedroom?³²³ This act, the culmination of the previous debaucheries, is

³²¹ Dio, *Roman History*, 61.10.3-4.

³²² Tristan Power, "Nero in Furs (Suet. Ner. 29)," *Materiali e Discussioni per l'analisi Dei Testi Classici*, no. 73 (2014): 205–209, 208.

³²³ Power, "Nero in Furs," 206. Suetonius gives a more lurid account in which Doryphorus (Pythagoras in all other accounts) waits for Nero to finish his assault before "finishing Nero off."

described by Susan Curry as a “last resort activity when he has run out of other ways to prostitute his own chastity.”³²⁴ Nero had become more like a sexual beast than an emperor, or even a human being. The assault on the genitals of boys and girls is made worse when one puts into perspective that this is not an instance that shows Nero as the dominant figure but in the passive role, emasculating and dehumanizing himself, by Roman standards, even further. That dehumanization, characterized by the wearing of animal hides, made the emperor associated with wild animals, which were often used to characterize the lowest orders of Roman society.

Nero’s physical appearance and hobbies are also criticized by Dio mainly because Nero’s looks, dress, and love for games, theater, and banquets are all associated with feminine behavior. In three excerpts, Dio writes about the kind of dress, appearance, and hobbies Nero pursued:

[1] These things, then, he did to celebrate the shaving of his beard; and in behalf of his preservation and the continuance of his power, he instituted some quadrennial games, which he called Neronia.³²⁵

[2] Had he merely done this, he would have been the subject of ridicule. Yet how could one endure even to hear about, let alone behold, a Roman, a senator, a patrician, a high priest, a Caesar, and emperor, an Augustus, named on the program among the contestants, training his voice, practicing various songs, wearing long hair on his head the while his chin was smooth-shaven, throwing his toga over his shoulder in the races, walking about with one or two attendants, looking askance at his opponents, and constantly uttering taunting remarks to them, standing in the dread of the directors of the games and the wielders of the whip and lavishing money on them all secretly to avoid being brought to book and scourged? And all this he did, though by winning the contests of the lyre-payers and tragedians and heralds he would make certain his defeat in the contest of the Caesars. What harsher proscription could there ever be than this, in which it was not Sulla that posted the names of others, but Nero that posted his own name? What stranger victory than one for which he received the crown of wild olive, bay, parsley or pine and lost the political crown? Yet why should one lament these acts of his alone, seeing that he also elevated himself on the high-soled buskins only to fall from the throne, and in putting on the mask threw off the dignity of his sovereignty to beg in the guise of a runaway slave, to be led about as a blind man, to be heavy with child, to be in labor,

³²⁴ Curry, “Nero *Quadripes*,” 209.

³²⁵ Dio, *Roman History*, 61.21.1.

to be a madman, or to wander an outcast, his favorite roles being those of Oedipus, Thyestes, Heracles, Alcmeon and Orestes?³²⁶

[3] When he received the senators, he wore a short, flowered tunic and a muslin neckcloth; for in matters of dress, also, he was already transgressing custom, even going so far as to wear ungirded tunics in public.³²⁷

Nero's physical traits of long hair, a smooth chin, wig wearing, a trained voice, the garb of an actor, a short tunic, and ungirded tunics all represent inappropriate dress and appearance for a Roman elite, especially the emperor. His appearance created a gender-ambiguous self-representation that threatened his identity as a *vir*. Rather than avoiding being labeled a *mollis* man or passive and soft, he embraced elements of dress and behavior, such as singing, lyre-playing, and acting, that undermined the "manly man" image he should possess. Even worse, his acting, rather than inspiring the "young in their pursuit of virtue," made a mockery of a central Roman ritual in the performances he engaged in onstage.³²⁸ His appearance opened him up to accusations of being gender-subversive and feeble which threatened his political career by casting doubt on his *auctoritas*. His dress could question his sexual preferences, which were no doubt already suspect, and he could be viewed, because of his effeminate actions, as being politically, socially, and morally weak. The reader could identify his dress and hobbies as the pinnacle pursuit of *luxuria* and a lack of self-respect and respect for customs and reveal a foulness of mind that threatened to undermine his political position. He was undeserving of the respect of the true *vir* that occupied the elite ranks, and his "slight and indistinct voice" would fail to earn the respect of his peers.³²⁹ As Dio states, Nero had failed in the contest of Caesars,

³²⁶ Dio, *Roman History*, 63.9.1-4.

³²⁷ Dio, *Roman History*, 63.13.1-3.

³²⁸ Niall W. Slater, "Nero's Masks," *The Classical World* 90, no.1 (1996): 33-40.

³²⁹ Dio, *Roman History*, 61.20.2.

and it could be argued that Nero also lost in the contest of true men. The reader recognizes that Nero was engaging with the lowest elements of society and taking on their attributes. More than that, though, Dio has used “Nero’s non-normative sexual behavior, gender expression, and physical posture as *topoi* of effective invective but are also areas of anxiety for human beings where one’s status as humanity is vulnerable.”³³⁰

All of these actions – his appearance, pursuits, promoting corrupt associates, and inverted sexuality – combined to create an emasculated man and a tyrant who possessed no restraint and endangered the Roman world in its social order and its domestic and foreign affairs. Dio describes two notable actions that resulted from Nero’s tyranny. The first is the Boudiccan Rebellion in Britain and the second results from Nero’s indulgence in his personal pursuits. Dio writes that while Nero was emperor, Britain was almost “lost to Rome while Nero was doing child’splay.”³³¹ Boudica, the queen of the Iceni tribe in Britain, led an uprising against the Romans and nearly pushed them out of Britain with around 70-80,000 Roman civilians dead.³³² Dio gives an undoubtedly fabricated speech by Boudica that pours scorn on Nero. He writes:

[1] (I rule) much less over the Romans themselves as did Messalina once and afterwards Agrippina and now Nero (who, though in name a man, is in fact a woman, as is proved by his singing, lyre-playing and beautification of his person).³³³

[2] Wherefore may this Mistress Domitia-Nero reign no longer over me or over you men; let the wench sing and lord it over Romans, for they surely deserve to be the slaves of such a woman after having submitted to her so long.³³⁴

³³⁰ Curry, “Nero *Quadripes*,” 200.

³³¹ Dio, *Roman History*, 62.1.

³³² Tacitus, *Annals*, 14.33.

³³³ Dio, *Roman History*, 62.6.3.

³³⁴ Dio, *Roman History*, 62.6.5.

Dio uses Boudica's speech to emasculate Nero and criticize the Romans for allowing the most unmanly and unfit *princeps* to rule over them and embroil them in tyranny. It is because Nero lacks the traits necessary for ruling and engages in luxurious effeminate pursuits that Rome should not rule over Britain and Nero should not even rule over the Romans; his masculinity is denigrated and ability to rule questioned while Boudica also gives a critique of Roman decadence.³³⁵ Nero's appearance, pursuits, and characteristics make him a woman unfit for rule. Since the speech is clearly fabricated, the reader can recognize that Dio is directly criticizing Nero and Roman society for, in the case of the lower classes, celebrating Nero and, for the elite, not overthrowing him. Nero's depravity and inverted sexuality, combined with his reversal of gender roles and association with the lowest elements of society, caused him to embroil the Roman state in a real crisis of imperial management. No one in the third century would have known what Boudica had said, if anything at all, but knew that she was an assertive, barbaric (foreign in ethnicity and behavior) woman used to make a point about an inadequate man.³³⁶

This imperial mismanagement continues when Nero promotes corrupt freedmen, such as Helius, to rule in his stead while he engages in effeminate pursuits. Dio writes:

Thus, the Roman empire was at that time a slave to two emperors at once, Nero and Helius; and I am unable to say which of them was the worse. In most respects they behaved entirely alike, and the one point of difference was that the descendant of Augustus was emulating lyre-players and tragedians, whereas the freedman of Claudius was emulating Caesars. As regards Tigellinus, I consider him a mere appendage of Nero, because he was constantly with him; but Polycleitus and Calvia Crispinilla, apart from Nero, plundered, sacked and despoiled everything that it was possible to pillage. The former was associated with Helius at Rome, and the latter with the "Sabina" who was known as Sporus. Calvia had been entrusted with the care of the boy and with the oversight of the

³³⁵ Eric Adler, "Boudica's Speeches in Tacitus and Dio," *The Classical World* 101, no. 2 (2008): 173–95, 192.

³³⁶ De La Bedoyere, "Virtue Honour, and Chastity," 21.

wardrobe, though a woman of high rank; and through her all were stripped of their possessions.³³⁷

Nero's pursuit of his passions led to a period from A.D. 64-68 where an imperial freedman, Helius, took up managing the empire while Nero squandered his time in Greece or indulged in a luxurious lifestyle. Nero's inability to control his passions and his association with unsavory individuals, mainly freedmen, allowed the empire to be dominated by Helius and another freedman, Polyclitus. Worse, a noblewoman who cared for Nero's "wife," Sporus, was enabled, through Sporus (and therefore through Nero), to cause havoc on the Roman elite. Nero and his favorites were joined in their crimes and "pillaging." The Roman elite, because of Nero's effeminate pursuit of *luxuria* and marriage to Sporus, both deviant behaviors, are dominated by corrupt associates while Nero is emasculated. The reader would recognize that had Nero engaged in normal relationships and behavior, neither Helius nor Sporus and Crispinilla would likely hold any power or influence. Nero became a true *mollis*, undeserving of rule, his power in question, his *auctoritas* diminished, and his masculinity evaporating. Essentially, "the *Princeps*, the first citizen of Rome, who ought to occupy the top rung in the hierarchy of citizenship, by virtue of his bodily behavior clings to the bottom."³³⁸ A conclusion on Nero is best given in another fabricated speech of Dio by Vindex, who led a rebellion against the emperor. It also highlights the real issue with Nero's behavior in the first sentence as well as the issue with sexual deviance or inverted gender by an emperor in general; everything that follows after is "window dressing" to accentuate the point. It highlights Nero's relationship with his mother, his marriages, friends, appearance, pursuits, and Nero as a tyrant. However, I must acknowledge that how we view and

³³⁷ Dio, *Roman History*, 63.12.2-4.

³³⁸ Curry, "Nero *Quadripes*," 205.

understand Nero comes from his extravagant creativity and the writings of those who hated him.³³⁹

[Vindex on Nero] he has despoiled the whole Roman world, because he has destroyed all the flower of the senate, because he debauched and then killed his mother, and does not preserve even the semblance of sovereignty. Many murders, robberies and outrages, it is true, have often been committed by others; but as for the other deeds committed by Nero, how could one find words fittingly to describe them? I have seen him, my friends and allies, — believe me, — I have seen that man (if man he is who has married Sporus and been given in marriage to Pythagoras), in the circle of the theater, that is, in the orchestra, sometimes holding the lyre and dressed in loose tunic and buskins, and again wearing in general-soled shoes and mask. I have often heard him sing, play the herald, and act in tragedies. I have seen him in chains, hustled about as a miscreant, heavy with child, aye, in the travail of childbirth — in short, imitating all the situations of mythology by what he said and what was said to him, by what he submitted to and by what he did. Will anyone, then, style such a person Caesar and emperor and Augustus? Never! Let no one abuse those sacred titles. They were held by Augustus and by Claudius, whereas this fellow might most properly be termed Thyestes, Oedipus, Alcmeon, or Orestes; for these are the characters that he represents on the stage and it is these titles that he has assumed in place of the others. Therefore, rise now at length against him; succor yourselves and succor the Romans; liberate the entire world.³⁴⁰

³³⁹ Champlin, “Nero Reconsidered,” 107.

³⁴⁰ Dio, *Roman History*, 63.22.3–6.

Chapter Three: Elagabalus

I. Elagabalus (Marcus Aurelius Antoninus)

“An account will be given presently of his marriages, in which he both married and was bestowed in marriage; for he appeared both as man and as woman, and in both relations conducted himself in the most licentious fashion.”³⁴¹

Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, the last Severan Emperor, whose reign Cassius Dio lived through in its entirety, is the most contemptible emperor in the entire narrative. Nowhere else in Dio's Roman History is an emperor's sexual preferences and behavior given as much attention as in Book LXXIX. Though Elagabalus's predecessors, Commodus and Caracalla (excluding Septimius Severus and Macrinus), are described as sexually depraved and cruel in many ways, this thesis concludes by focusing on Elagabalus (Elagabalus is the derogatory name for Marcus) because all Dio's descriptions of the lurid details of prior emperor's lives seem to have his reign as their model. While this thesis, which is the main and final point of this study, would require for full justification, comparison of Elagabalus's action with all the other bad emperors he describes, comparison with his account of the notorious Julio-Claudians furnishes ample warrant for this conclusion. Dio lived through the reigns of Marcus Aurelius, Commodus, Pertinax, Septimius Severus, Caracalla, and Macrinus. The latter two he depicts as especially bad emperors. Elagabalus appears as by far the worst villain of his lifetime. Adam Kemezis gives the best overview of Elagabalus's reign and modern perceptions about him. I will paraphrase Kemezis before beginning my analysis, which sometimes intertwines with his.

³⁴¹ Dio, *Roman History*, 79.5.5.

According to Kemezis, a standard sequence of events in modern analysis characterizes his reign. Elagabalus came to power supported by his mother and grandmother. He quickly revealed himself to be a youthful religious fanatic who pursued an agenda that defied “political and cultural common sense.”³⁴² His foreign cult was offensive to Roman religious sensibilities, which made him distasteful to the Roman public, and the adults or advisors in his life were unable to do anything to control him. As Elagabalus ages, he becomes more fanatical, and his unpopularity reaches peak levels. His associates and supporters need an “exit strategy” and influence him to make Severus Alexander, his cousin, Caesar.³⁴³ He regrets the decision and tries to remove Alexander from the succession, for which the Praetorian guard rid him of his associates and then assassinate him shortly after. What behavior, outside of plotting against his cousin, made Elagabalus so unpopular, and why did his removal resonate with the Roman elite?

Dio opens his account by describing how Elagabalus persecuted senators and other former imperial favorites to assert himself. He even accuses him of murdering one senator to have his wife. While murdering members of the elite is undoubtedly not a way to gain the adoration of one of the most important classes in Rome, it is the deviant behavior of Elagabalus that turns many away from him. Dio discusses at length both his religious and sexual offenses. While the religious aspects merit their own discussion, they will have to be omitted due to the scope of this thesis and its focus on sexual deviancy. Dio focuses on Elagabalus’s “marriages,” his appearance or physical attributes, and some of his subversive behaviors. Early in Book LXXIX, Dio writes, “an account will be given presently of his marriages, in which he both

³⁴² Kemezis, “The Fall of Elagabalus,” 351.

³⁴³ Kemezis, “The Fall of Elagabalus,” 351.

married and was bestowed in marriage; for he appeared both as man and as woman, and in both relations conducted himself in the most licentious fashion.”³⁴⁴ Dio indicates early on that Elagabalus subverts gender and transgresses acceptable norms and allows the reader to make an immediate connection to another “bad” emperor, Nero.³⁴⁵ Early in his narrative, Dio is framing Elagabalus in familiar terms and situations that show him subverting gender and parodying Roman marital rites. It is unacceptable for a man to be “given” in marriage, especially to another man. It implies that he is submissive in the relationship. At the outset, Elagabalus is already unfit to rule. Dio writes of Elagabalus’s marriages or partners in three separate passages:

[1] The False Antoninus married Cornelia Paula, in order, as he said, that he might sooner become a father — he who could not even be a man! On the occasion of his marriage not only the senate and the people and the equestrian order but also the wives of the senators received a largess; the populace was banqueted at a cost of six hundred sesterces apiece, and the soldiers at a cost of four hundred more; there were contests of gladiators, at which the emperor wore a purple-bordered toga, just as he had done at the *ludi votivi*; and various wild beasts were slain, including an elephant and fifty-one tigers — a larger number than had ever before been dispatched at one time. Afterwards he divorced Paula on the ground that she had some blemish on her body, and cohabited with Aquilia Severa, thereby most flagrantly violating the law; for she was consecrated to Vesta, and yet he most impiously defiled her. Indeed, he had the boldness to say: “I did it in order that godlike children might spring from me, the high priest, and from her, the high-priestess.” Thus he plumed himself over an act for which he ought to have been scourged in the Forum, thrown into prison, and then put to death. However, he did not keep even this woman long, but married a second, a third, a fourth, and still another; after that he returned to Severa.³⁴⁶

[2] The husband of this “woman” was Hierocles, a Carian slave, once the favorite of Gordius, from whom he had learned to drive a chariot. It was in this connection that he won the emperor’s favour by a most remarkable chance. It seems that in a certain race Hierocles fell out of his chariot just opposite the seat of Sardanapalus, losing his helmet in his fall, and being still beardless and adorned with a crown of yellow hair, he attracted the attention of the emperor and was immediately rushed

³⁴⁴ Dio, *Roman History*, 79.5.5.

³⁴⁵ Mader, “History as Carnival,” 148. Elagabalus is like Nero in his visiting of brothels, taverns, wig-wearing, dancing, and voice.

³⁴⁶ Dio, *Roman History*, 79.9.1-4.

to the palace; and there by his nocturnal feats he captivated Sardanapalus more than ever and became exceedingly powerful. Indeed, he even had greater influence than the emperor himself, and it was thought a small thing that his mother, while still a slave, should be brought to Rome by soldiers and be numbered among the wives of ex-consuls. Certain other men, too, were frequently honoured by the emperor and became powerful, some because they had joined in his uprising and others because they committed adultery with him. For he wished to have the reputation of committing adultery, so that in this respect, too, he might imitate the most lewd women; and he would often allow himself to be caught in the very act, in consequence of which he used to be violently upbraided by his “husband” and beaten, so that he had black eyes. His affection for this “husband” was no light inclination, but an ardent and firmly fixed passion, so much so that he not only did not become vexed at any such harsh treatment, but on the contrary loved him the more for it and wished to make him Caesar in very fact; and he even threatened his grandmother when she opposed him in this matter, and he became at odds with the soldiers largely on this man's account.³⁴⁷

[3] Aurelius Zoticus, a native of Smyrna, whom they also called “Cook,” after his father's trade, incurred the emperor's thorough love and thorough hatred, and for the latter reason his life was saved. This Aurelius not only had a body that was beautiful all over, seeing that he was an athlete, but in particular he greatly surpassed all others in the size of his private parts. This fact was reported to the emperor by those who were on the look-out for such things, and the man was suddenly whisked away from the games and brought to Rome, accompanied by an immense escort, larger than Abgarus had had in the reign of Severus or Tiridates in that of Nero. He was appointed cubicularius before he had even been seen by the emperor, was honoured by the name of the latter's grandfather, Avitus, was adorned with garlands as at a festival, and entered the palace lighted by the glare of many torches. Sardanapalus, on seeing him, sprang up with rhythmic movements, and then, when Aurelius addressed him with the usual salutation, “My Lord Emperor, Hail!” he bent his neck so as to assume a ravishing feminine pose, and turning his eyes upon him with a melting gaze, answered without any hesitation: “Call me not Lord, for I am a Lady.” Then Sardanapalus immediately joined him in the bath, and finding him when stripped to be equal to his reputation, burned with even greater lust, reclined on his breast, and took dinner, like some loved mistress, in his bosom. But Hierocles fearing that Zoticus would captivate the emperor more completely than he himself could, and that he might therefore suffer some terrible fate at his hands, as often happens in the case of rival lovers, caused the cup-bearers, who were well disposed toward him, to administer a drug that abated the other's manly prowess. And so Zoticus, after a whole night of embarrassment, being unable to secure an erection, was deprived

³⁴⁷ Dio, *Roman History*, 79.15.1-4.

of all the honours that he had received, and was driven out of the palace, out of Rome, and later out of the rest of Italy; and this saved his life.³⁴⁸

Dio opens the first excerpt by calling Elagabalus the “False Antoninus” before describing his marriage to Cornelia Paula. The implication of the insult is not clear to the modern reader. However, the ancient audience would know that Elagabalus had attempted to cement his legitimacy as a member of the Severan Dynasty by claiming he was the son of Caracalla. This claim was both untrue and offensive as it meant that Elagabalus was the product of incest, which could undermine respect for the Severan dynastic claim. Regardless, Elagabalus had cemented his position as ruler by defeating Macrinus in a civil war. Dio was just taking the opportunity to insult the emperor and mock the claim about his lineage. Next, Dio writes that he married Cornelia Paula to “sooner become a father- he who could not even be a man!” Elagabalus appeared concerned with his *genius* and producing children to become his heirs, an essential goal for the new emperor in restoring dynastic stability after Macrinus had temporarily usurped power from Caracalla. Dio also combines the interest in reproducing with the insult that Elagabalus was not a man, an issue I will address after discussing his marriage to Severa.

While Dio is sure to describe the *luxuria* that accompanied the marriage to Paula and his reasons for marrying her in the first place, his subsequent divorce and “cohabitation” with Severa generate outrage. Like evil emperors before him, such as Domitian and Caracalla, Elagabalus defiles a Vestal Virgin, a severe crime. In the past, those who had a sexual relationship with a Vestal were starved to death (or killed differently) alongside the Vestal for their act, which was a crime against the state and the gods; the *Pax deorum* is disturbed by assaulting the Vestals as is the safety of the state. Much like a Roman Matron, a Vestal is considered a servant feature of the

³⁴⁸ Dio, *Roman History*, 79.16.1-6.

safety and longevity of the state through her virginity and role in the Cult of Vesta. For someone to upset this order was of great consequence, but even worse when the man who was supposed to uphold the state and its laws was openly violating them, committing a crime of *incestum* (a type of *stuprum*) in the process.³⁴⁹ Not only did he commit a crime, for which Dio calls for a just punishment, but Elagabalus is perceived as openly mocking traditional religious principles in the process. He claimed divinity while still living and then sought to marry a representative of another divinity to produce genuine “gods” from the relationship. Elagabalus tried to implement profound religious changes by promoting the Syrian Sun God, Elagabal, over Jupiter, which deeply offended the sensibilities of the Roman religious faithful. It is unclear if Elagabalus was attempting to insult or mock the Roman pantheon or genuinely add to its list of deities, but Dio perceived it as offensive nonetheless. Elagabalus engaged in an unlawful relationship with a Vestal, attempted to conceive with her, and mocked Roman religious traditions all at once, divorcing his first wife and then engaging in multiple relationships afterward. It seems he lacked self-control and good judgment in choosing partners or that he desperately sought, just as Caligula did, to produce a child, which he could not do. However, Dio is not concerned with potential adultery or his many marriages but with the reason behind all these things, which emasculates the emperor and calls into questions his ability to rule. Dio writes:

But this Sardanapalus, who saw fit to make even the gods cohabit under due form of marriage, lived most licentiously himself from first to last. He married many women, and had intercourse with even more without any legal sanction; yet it was not that he had any need of them himself, but simply that he wanted to imitate their actions when he should lie with his lovers and wanted to get accomplices in his wantonness by associating with them indiscriminately. He used his body both for doing and allowing many strange things, which no one could endure to tell or hear of; but his most conspicuous acts, which it would be impossible to conceal,

³⁴⁹ The charge of *incestum* did not necessarily imply incest, though incest could be included in the charge, but of a crime that violated religious principles, especially through sexual contact.

were the following. He would go to the taverns by night, wearing a wig, and there ply the trade of a female huckster. He frequented the notorious brothels, drove out the prostitutes, and played the prostitute himself. Finally, he set aside a room in the palace and there committed his indecencies, always standing nude at the door of the room, as the harlots do, and shaking the curtain which hung from gold rings, while in a soft and melting voice he solicited the passers-by. There were, of course, men who had been specially instructed to play their part. For, as in other matters, so in this business, too, he had numerous agents who sought out those who could best please him by their foulness. He would collect money from his patrons and give himself airs over his gains; he would also dispute with his associates in this shameful occupation, claiming that he had more lovers than they and took in more money.³⁵⁰

Dio opens this passage by calling Elagabalus a different name, Sardanapalus, an Assyrian ruler who was believed to have been extraordinarily decadent and engaged in effeminate behavior such as wearing wigs, wearing makeup, having orgies, and engaging in submissive sexual roles, an account made famous by Diodorus Siculus. Dio believes Elagabalus to be a similar figure, and he lists precisely why. Dio describes the reason for Elagabalus's marriages, relationships with women, and nighttime revels as being driven by his perversions. Elagabalus did not marry women to procreate, did not have sex with women for pleasure, and did not seek out brothels for their services, but did so to become the prostitute himself and to learn how to please male lovers. Elagabalus becomes worse than Caligula, who opened a brothel of noblewomen in the imperial palace, and worse than Nero, who also wore wigs and frequented the taverns and brothels to outrage noblewomen and girls. Rather than using others for his gratification or participating in assaults with others, he is being used and assaulted.³⁵¹ All of Elagabalus's relations boil down into a wild, gender-inverted, and sexually depraved spree where

³⁵⁰ Dio, *Roman History*, 79.13.1–4.

³⁵¹ Chrysanthou, "Sex and Power," 612. Elagabalus is worse than Caligula because, even though Caligula used brothels to assault noblewomen and opened one in the imperial palace, Elagabalus is the prostitute himself, which equates the emperor to a shameful profession. Elagabalus is closer to Messalina than an emperor.

the highest figure in the Roman world becomes equal to the lowest and submissive to men, who undoubtedly were the penetrating partner, making Elagabalus “woman-like”; the emphasis on Elagabalus’s “soft and melting voice” is vital as voice and speech are indicators of an emasculated or *mollis* man just as the wig wearing is also a sign of effeminacy.³⁵² It is easy to imagine the embarrassment of the elite, such as Dio, to have heard or witnessed the events described, to suffer under the rule of an emperor who has become a literal prostitute and takes pride in it. Elagabalus has parodied the proper social order and removed the proper sexual partners of men by replacing the prostitute, the slave, or the *puer*. He is too old to be a *puer* and a freeborn Roman citizen, and the emperor; he should not be the submissive partner in any encounter, but he becomes a lesser partner and relishes it. He goes as far as to instruct men to penetrate him and has “agents” that employ people for his debauched revels. The story’s reality is not important; rather, the negative attitude toward a feminine role and the association with despised social classes make the story relevant. Elagabalus differs entirely from the ideal behavior of a Roman man or emperor in the social-sexual hierarchy.³⁵³ This hierarchy is connected with “a socio-political hierarchy,” which Elagabalus is represented as disrupting.³⁵⁴ However, none of this behavior surprises Dio for narratological purposes, given how he conducts himself everywhere outside of “court.” Dio writes:

³⁵² Bittarello, “Otho, Elagabalus, and the Judgment of Paris,” 98. “Softness” in an adult male, especially with Elagabalus’s dancing, luxuriousness, sexual excess, and adultery also indicates, to the Romans, cowardice, timidity, laziness, and self-indulgence.

³⁵³ Chrysanthou, “Sex and Power,” 612. The ideal Roman emperor should be presented as a triumphant military commander.

³⁵⁴ Rantala, “Ruling in Purple,” 124; Chrysanthou, “Sex and Power,” 602. Disruptions of gender norms are combined with a disruption of the socio-political order, and therefore a serious threat to the stability of the Roman Empire and its moral standards.

When trying someone in court he really had more or less the appearance of a man, but everywhere else he showed affectations in his actions and in the quality of his voice. For instance, he used to dance, not only in the orchestra, but also, in a way, even while walking, performing sacrifices, receiving salutations, or delivering a speech. And finally, — to go back now to the story which I began, — he was bestowed in marriage and was termed wife, mistress, and queen. He worked with wool, sometimes wore a hair-net, and painted his eyes, daubing them with white lead and alkanet. Once, indeed, he shaved his chin and held a festival to mark the event; but after that he had the hairs plucked out, so as to look more like a woman. And he often reclined while receiving the salutations of the senators.³⁵⁵

His dancing, walking, talking, wool-working, makeup, and depilation (comparable to Nero), combined with his sexual inversion and gender identity, all point to Elagabalus being a *mollis* man, or even worse to the Romans, Elagabalus may have genuinely been a *cinaedus*.³⁵⁶ He had sex with women to learn how to please men and his appearance and behavior were all effeminate-like, especially the wool-working, which is identified early on in Dio as a positive female trait in the story of Lucretia. Wool-working here is used as an insult because Elagabalus is a male performing female duties, from household duties to sexual actions. According to Dio, Elagabalus even wanted to look like a woman. This behavior is upsetting to the elite, but beyond being offensive, what truly bothered men like Dio? Two critical portions of the excerpt indicate what bothered the elite outside of inverted gender or sexual excess. Elagabalus acted effeminately while receiving salutations and reclined while receiving salutations from the senators. It was not only that the elite could not respect a *princeps* who was viewed as sexually depraved and submissive, which could lead to poor judgment and rule, but that he did not respect the elite or their traditions. Salutations and meetings for discussing pressing affairs were essential aspects of ruling, and Elagabalus's disregard or contempt for them while flaunting his effeminate

³⁵⁵ Dio, *Roman History*, 79.14.3.

³⁵⁶ Dio, *Roman History*, 69.9, 69.28.

behavior undoubtedly infuriated the senators. While the first excerpt and subsequent discussion demonstrate Elagabalus's interactions with women and his woman-like behavior, the following two excerpts deal with his relationships with men, which prove far fouler and more intolerable for the Roman elite.

In the second excerpt, (2) Elagabalus's first named same-sex partner, Hierocles, demonstrates the emperor's eccentric behavior and is a contributing factor to his eventual assassination. Hierocles, a slave and charioteer, a low member of Roman society, is whisked away by the emperor to become his lover. Only Dio refers to him as his husband in a literal sense, most likely to connect Elagabalus to Nero, who had married, as the "submitting" partner, Pythagoras.³⁵⁷ Hierocles is purposefully described as beardless, indicating his young age, but could also show a reversal of the dynamic where a man is allowed sexual contact with a *puer*, a young male boy, as the dominant partner. Here, Elagabalus, the emperor, a freeborn citizen, and still a boy himself, becomes the *puer* to a slave, an upending of appropriate social order and behavior. Though Hierocles's age is unknown, the assumption that he is also a young man is implied by his appearance. Elagabalus gave this slave his freedom, brought him into the folds of imperial power, and became sexually submissive to him. Dio explains this relationship by saying that, because of his sexual relationship and dominance over the emperor, Hierocles became even more powerful than the emperor himself, even having his mother included among the ex-consul's wives, privileges that another evil emperor, Caligula, had given to his sisters. The text provides rich comparisons to other emperors and evokes their memories to readers. For the Roman audience, a young emperor who is sexually submissive and manipulated by a former slave is

³⁵⁷ As compared to the *Historia Augusta* or Herodian.

undoubtedly not a good indication of a promising reign, nor is it an appropriate relationship for the emperor. He could capitulate to his lover and grant him unwarranted honors, which is precisely what happens when he desires to make Hierocles Caesar and allows him to give his mother honors reserved for the highest rank of the Roman elite, which certainly offended that class.

Hierocles is not the only one who receives power due to a connection to Elagabalus. In the second portion of the second excerpt, Dio describes that those who had joined Elagabalus in the civil war had gained favors for their service. However, Dio connects those individuals to others who obtained honors because of sexual affairs with the emperor. The two are not mutually exclusive, but that those who had gained power because of their service could also gain power for a sexual relationship, once again highlighting the belief that those empowered by the emperor who seemed undeserving of their status likely obtained it because they were sexually connected to the emperor. This “adultery” is something Elagabalus wishes to be known for, perhaps advertising his sexual inversion as a method to gain favor with him and to connect him further to behave as a woman. Dio has created a sense that political reality is “suspended or inverted.”³⁵⁸ At the end of Elagabalus’s reign, the situation is rectified by his death, and all those who share his power also perish. As Kemezis states, “in Dio’s version, Elagabalus is put on the throne by lowlifes who deservedly perish with him, the Emperor is a puppet, but the manipulators exist only as a function of his bizarre and sordid milieu.”³⁵⁹ Since Elagabalus promotes his twisted sexuality, those who accompany him must behave the same or have enabled it in some way so that when he no longer has the favor of the Praetorian Guard, he and his followers must go. That

³⁵⁸ Kemezis, “The Fall of Elagabalus,” 355.

³⁵⁹ Kemezis, “The Fall of Elagabalus,” 355.

his companions were viewed in this manner is evident when Dio writes, speaking of Elagabalus's attempt to remove his cousin, that:

For Alexander was sedulously guarded by his mother and his grandmother and by the soldiers, and the Praetorians, also, on becoming aware of the attempt of Sardanapalus, raised a terrible tumult; and they did not stop rioting until Sardanapalus, accompanied by Alexander, came to the camp and poured out his supplications and under compulsion surrendered such of his companions in lewdness as the soldiers demanded. In behalf of Hierocles he offered piteous pleas and bewailed him with tears; then, pointing to his own throat, he cried: "Grant me this one man, whatever you may have been pleased to suspect about him, or else slay me." Thus, with difficulty he succeeded in appeasing them.³⁶⁰

Shortly before his assassination, the Praetorians made Elagabalus dismiss all his "companions in lewdness," including Hierocles. Though Hierocles was temporarily saved, the point made by Dio in the two excerpts is that different factions of the Roman imperial world, such as the Praetorian Guard, were deeply offended by how the emperor behaved and whom he had elevated to power. By casting his associates and the emperor himself as sexually inverted and allowing sexual favors to translate into actual power, the Praetorians and Severus Alexander's faction seem like the heroes of the story, rebuking licentiousness in the emperor and ensuring tradition and normalcy were protected. Whether these companions were his sexual partners, wartime supporters, or part of his imperial court is irrelevant; it is because Elagabalus's behavior and eccentricity had offended the former strong base of his supporters, the troops, and was already offensive to the elite, the senate, that Dio provides powerful *exempla* about his character and associates that make his removal more necessary. With Dio's extensive focus on sex in Elagabalus's reign, the association between his sexual practices and maladministration is present; those who were promoted are seen as sexual partners. As Kemezis also points out,

³⁶⁰ Dio, *Roman History*, 79.19.1-2.

because Elagabalus had offended his base of power, the soldiers and Praetorians, their reason for supporting Severus Alexander needed a foundation that could be found in his and his administration's transgressive sexuality.³⁶¹ The inverted sexuality and its implications for rulership and administration are plausible enough for those who needed justification for the removal of the emperor. Elagabalus's lowlife associates, whom the adolescent emperor had brought into the imperial fold, were just as much a reason for his demise as any story of sexual inversion.

There is another part of the excerpt (2) that provides insight into the transgressive sexual behavior of the emperor. He commits adultery like a "lewd woman," but he also likes to be caught doing so. Hierocles then beats Elagabalus for his infidelity. As strange as the entire scene is, it is more horrifying to someone like Dio, a member of the Roman elite, that the emperor is beaten. Being beaten falls into the category that a Roman *vir* and freeborn citizen is supposed to be protected from; it is the behavior of a slave. A freeborn Roman man was not only not to have improper sexual relations, but he was also not to be beaten, and that beating contained sexual undertones as having his body "penetrated."³⁶² This scene is used to make Elagabalus seem even more perverted and strange. He is like an adulterous wife whose husband beats her, but as a

³⁶¹ Marijn Icks, "Empire of the Sun?: Civic Responses to the Rise and Fall of Sol Elagabal in the Roman Empire," In *Ritual Dynamics and Religious Change in the Roman Empire: Proceedings of the Eighth Workshop of the International Network Impact of Empire* (Heidelberg, July 5–7, 2007), edited by Olivier Hekster, Sebastian Schmidt-Hofner, and Christian Witschel: 111–20. Brill, 2009: 115. The Roman elite were appalled by the actions of Elagabalus, as were the soldiers who could not identify themselves with the emperor.; Kemezis, "The Fall of Elagabalus," 359.

³⁶² Chrysanthou, "Sex and Power," 616. A passive body can be penetrated or beaten. It is slave-like behavior and associated with the status of a slave. The emperor's *dignitas* was assaulted and lowered.

reward, not as a punishment. As stated above, this behavior frustrates the soldiers, and Elagabalus's promotion of Hierocles and men like him generates discord among his most substantial claim to power, the troops.

The final excerpt (3) is nearly comical in describing a love interest of Elagabalus, Zoticus, whom the emperor desires for his large genitals and becomes a rival for Hierocles. This passage is not as strongly indicative of the underlying issues of Elagabalus's reign as the second. However, there are several implications in the story. First, Dio uses recognizable attributes of Elagabalus's physiognomy to characterize him as effeminate and represent, to the audience, the emperor's morally and mentally weak or foul nature.³⁶³ In the passage, Elagabalus has rhythmic movements, a ravishing feminine pose, and a melting gaze, which he uses to seduce Zoticus and demand that he be called "lady."³⁶⁴ Dio describes him as a "loved mistress," and it is only the intervention of Hierocles, out of jealousy and fear that Elagabalus may promote Zoticus above him, that stops the consummation of Elagabalus and Zoticus's relationship. The entire situation is comically bizarre, with the emperor as the willing submissive partner in his relationships, one lowborn man attempting to gain influence over the emperor and the other seeking to preserve his

³⁶³ Rantala, "Ruling in Purple," 125. It is like that Dio chose to portray Elagabalus in the most extreme manner possible. Rather than acting like a woman, or having feminine traits, Elagabalus literally wanted to be a woman. Dio draws from examples or concepts that had existed from Aristotle in the 4th century B.C. to Polemon's handbook on physiognomy. The behaviors, actions, and sexual relationships held by Elagabalus are used to demonstrate his feminine attributes, but also demonstrate that the biological aspects of sex were not the only ones that came into consideration by the Romans.

³⁶⁴ Rantala, "Ruling in Purple," 121. Elagabalus, a moniker of Elagabal, and names like Sardanapalus, are used purposefully by Dio to paint the emperor as a foreigner. Alongside this foreign image, Easterners were viewed as passive, soft, treacherous, feeble, and feminine. Dio connected Elagabalus to a tradition of woman-like men where his masculinity, and thus his ability to rule, was in doubt.

by preventing the emperor from acting on his same-sex desires. If anything, it demonstrates the emperor is far more concerned with his bedroom affairs and that Hierocles believed he could keep his power and influence by eliminating males who could replace him as the emperor's lover. Elagabalus is not the figure acting, but the figure who is acted upon, and his ability to be manipulated and fickleness is apparent to Hierocles, who understands the emperor would influence those who sexually satisfy him.

Outside of the nonnormative sexual relationship being discussed by Dio, the implication that his sexual inversion was a threat to the empire through maladministration is also apparent. The reader understands that Elagabalus exercises bad judgment and administration in two ways. First, he has an extreme expenditure on escorting Zoticus to Rome, where he throws the man a festival on par with Tiridates crowning by Nero. Dio believes that this escort, which lasted several months, cost 800,000 sesterces a day, a vast sum from the treasuries.³⁶⁵ Suppose Nero's expenditure was frowned upon even though it was a legitimate affair where Nero bestowed Armenia to Tiridates. In that case, it is not hard to imagine the disgust of the elite that Elagabalus had given an even larger escort to a lowborn man and celebrated him for his genitals, not for any political purpose. It was a gross misappropriation of funds and mismanagement and neglect of public duties for the lustful pursuits of Elagabalus. Second, Elagabalus abused his position to reward the man for his private parts by giving him a festival that is like Tiridates entry to Rome, the office of *cubicularius*, and providing a family name, thus making the Romans witness his perversion firsthand in a public display. Allowing this man, who was solely there to sexually dominate the emperor, into a position in the imperial household that managed household affairs

³⁶⁵ Dio, *Roman History*, 63.5-7.

was undoubtedly distasteful and usually associated with a role a eunuch should fulfill. Lastly, Elagabalus had individuals “on the lookout” for men to sexually satisfy him, which could be interpreted as the emperor being more concerned with searching the empire for same-sex sexual partners rather than administering affairs or using his agents for actual political purposes.³⁶⁶ Regardless of the interpretation provided, the implication is that Elagabalus failed to fulfill his role as Princeps and instead participated in perverted love affairs, ridiculous expenditures, and bestowed honors on undeserving individuals.

Dio portrays Elagabalus as a lustful tyrant whose *libido* is the focus of the narrative. It is his sexual appetite and, partly, his religious changes that offend the elite and the troops, mainly the Praetorians, that cause his removal.³⁶⁷ The lewd, sexually inverted, and feminine adolescent was unfit for rule, and his sexual proclivities necessitated his removal, especially when these behaviors were not tolerable by the hyper-masculine men of the army or Praetorian Guard that had supported his takeover. Why would true men, who were masculine and robust, support a boy who went as far as to “ask the physicians to contrive a woman’s vagina in his body by means of an incision, promising them large sums for doing so.”³⁶⁸ Someone who squandered state resources on his love interests and was regularly penetrated by other men, turning himself into a common prostitute. His perceived foul mind caused him to be easily manipulated, weak, and

³⁶⁶ Mader, “History as Carnival,” 145-146. Dio uses his account to create a theme that Elagabalus is of a single-minded perverted pursuit, to seek unnatural sexual relationships. Seeking out men with large genitals is part of this theme.

³⁶⁷ Mader, “History as Carnival,” 143. *Libido* is the underlying motif of Elagabalus’s reign, which is similar to Commodus.

³⁶⁸ Dio, *Roman History*, 79.16.7; Rantala, “Ruling in Purple,” 123. His action is associated with Eunuchs, except he is attempting to replicate a vagina rather than castrating himself. Regardless, Dio uses the statement to strengthen the picture of Elagabalus as a dangerous, degenerate other, by his nature as a feminine easterner.

incapable of fulfilling the duties of *princeps*, outside of appearing for court, which is the only behavior Dio speaks positively of. His behavior led to his demise, and Dio's opinion on the result is that Elagabalus "received a well-deserved reward for his debauchery ... he was slain by them (the Praetorians) in his camp."³⁶⁹ What is implied is that, since unlike the other bad emperors, Dio was alive for his reign, his removal and the subsequent return to traditional values and religion under Severus Alexander required the official stance of the new regime to portray and give credence to the rumors or actions occurring under Elagabalus. The new regime could not be like the last, and Alexander's success over his cousin beginning in A.D. 222 necessitated making Elagabalus out to be as bad as possible. Few *exempla* generate as much attention or shock as gender-bending sexual escapades and an emasculated ruler incapable of managing the affairs of the empire and honoring his office. Dio, courting favor with the new regime, for which he was rewarded with a consulship, likely supported and reiterated negative stories or behaviors of the emperor to reinforce his position. Readers understood that, as in the past, bad sexual behavior, accompanied by other tyrannical actions, was enough reason to remove an emperor from power and that such behavior was typical of a bad ruler, and if Elagabalus indeed exhibited similar behavior, his removal was also necessary and good.

While Dio's contemporary readers no doubt recognized the history and actions of emperors he discussed in his history, they all would be aware of the rumors and actions of Elagabalus and, perhaps, understood the true reason for his assassination and the importance of agreeing with the new regime's stance on Alexander's predecessor; to avoid the executions that accompanied Elagabalus's rise and fall, it was best to fall in line with the new imperial

³⁶⁹ Dio, *Roman History*, 79.17.1.

messaging. It is not the historical facts surrounding his fall or behavior, but what Dio writes about it that is important, and being able to “read through the lines” to understand which parties were offended or displeased alongside what rumors or stories prevailed and generated the most disgust among the elite, like Dio, that necessitated or justified his removal. In Dio’s *Roman History*, the emperor’s bedroom contributes to his demise as much as a good emperor’s normal relationships contribute to his positive image, which allows conclusions to be drawn about how he handles the affairs of the Roman state.³⁷⁰ Suppose Dio’s account of Elagabalus’s reign is tailored to his imperial allegiances. If that is the case, the question of why sex and the implications of sexual inversion in the portrayal of a *malus princeps* in his history as a whole takes on a secondary aspect: dynastic propaganda.

³⁷⁰ Bittarello, “Otho, Elagabalus and The Judgment of Paris,” 109. Elagabalus’s subverting gender boundaries by playing the role of a seductive female harms his subjects directly and indirectly by allowing his perceived sexual partners to achieve power and making a mockery of his station. Bittarello compares it to Venus’s seduction of Paris being the root cause for the destruction of Troy.

Conclusion

I. Portraying the *Malus Princeps*: Dio and the Worst Severan

Among his many accounts of “evil princes,” none betray as much visceral disgust as Dio’s portrayal of Elagabalus. Nowhere else in the whole history, not even in the accounts of the Julio-Claudians, is so much attention given to the sexuality of the ruler. Why was his condemnation of Elagabalus so decisive, and why was sexual deviance at the heart of the narrative? In this instance, the facts about the author matter more than his historical retelling of events past and contemporary. Dio believed he was passing on a public narrative with little contribution of his input or judgment; what he was recording at the time was the “truth.” However, Dio was not present in Rome during the reign of Elagabalus, and, unlike other periods of his history, such as Commodus’s rule, he could not give an eyewitness account of events. Elagabalus’s administration was secretive, there were no nonparticipant witnesses from Dio’s class, and because Severus Alexander took over immediately after his cousin’s death, the version of events given is likely the product of information supplied by Severus Alexander and his supporters.³⁷¹ However, Dio is still a faithful historian, and he counts on his readers to understand that, given his current position when writing his narrative, the historical narrative was subsumed into a political one or an “authorized” narrative. While his accounts of other bad emperors all relate the dire consequences of their political actions, such as Nero’s near loss of Britain, Elagabalus’s narrative is almost wholly a judgment on character, where the reader has to have the proper insight to understand the political implications. Elagabalus’s reign was disruptive and unusual, and when Severus Alexander assumed power, there was a resolution to the disruption of the

³⁷¹ Kemezis, “The Fall of Elagabalus,” 355–56.

Roman world. In Dio's account, Elagabalus's sexual conduct and corruption in court, combined with administrative abuse, are put to an end by soldiers after he tries to murder his cousin. Sexual depravity is the catalyst for hatred toward the emperor, which is capped off by threatening his morally superior cousin. Despite the argument, presented primarily by Kemezis, that Dio was adhering to an official narrative, another interpretation can also be equally true.

The Romans viewed Elagabalus as strange and foreign, and any poor behavior in Elagabalus would not surprise Dio, who had lived through Commodus and Caracalla. This attitude can "be explained by the fact that gender, and ideas of proper or traditional gender roles and behavior, had a tremendous significance for Roman society and social order."³⁷² The significance of gender was not only legal, where women had limited private or public duties, and men could be barred from office or ostracized for their sexual actions, but also "an unofficial entity in all spheres and strata of the Roman Empire" and "affected the ways Romans behaved, how they thought and remembered, and as a how they built their identity."³⁷³ Gender is pit against true "Romanness," and the behaviors Dio describes in bad rulers are anything but truly Roman. Clothing, feminine expressions, same-sex relationships outside of acceptable partners, the role played during intercourse, and even one's voice can make a man "un-roman." An emperor should always act as a real Roman, a real *vir*, and avoid crossing the gender binary, which emperors like Caligula, Nero, and Elagabalus were exceptionally bad at adhering to. Emperors like "Caligula, Nero, Domitian, Commodus, and Elagabalus, challenged traditional notions of power and depressed evolving constructs of imperial identity and concepts of

³⁷² Rantala, "Ruling in Purple," 127.

³⁷³ Rantala, "Ruling in Purple," 127.

empire.”³⁷⁴ Those notions of power (how one with power should behave), with a perceived strict adherence to traditions and respectable behavior, were compromised by an emperor’s sexual habits and assaults on the elite’s *libertas*. When an emperor could be dominated by another man, or in the case of Tiberius or Claudius, dominated by women or lust for unacceptable sexual partners, it means his mind was weak and his ability to rule could be questioned. Corrupt favorites could be promoted, the emperor could be made a laughingstock, and domestic or foreign affairs could be neglected. Elagabalus’s end has a moralizing element, in which a conservative and traditional good overcomes a sexually depraved bad. More than that, the problem underscoring Elagabalus’s reign, in general, was that “young figurehead emperors” gave legitimacy to the ruling class but not to individual members of it, from members of the senate to the Praetorian prefects, who constantly vied for power. Thus, Elagabalus was disposed of when his reign no longer benefited his constituents, who had helped him to secure his office.³⁷⁵ Plausible narratives were generated along the tropes of standard tyrannical *topoi* that would justify the removal of emperors who failed to satisfy the various factions of the Roman political structure. Alexander’s supporters and Dio were committed to the idea that politicians must act accordingly and live according to traditional responsibilities, laws, and social standards since Augustus. They were to be held personally accountable, and when they fail, they must be removed. As in the case of assassinated Julio-Claudians, emperors who failed in some aspects of rule or all of them due to their own faults.³⁷⁶

³⁷⁴ Varner, “Transcending Gender,” 198.

³⁷⁵ Kemezis, “The Fall of Elagabalus,” 372.

³⁷⁶ Kemezis, “The Fall of Elagabalus,” 383.

However, similar to Nero's suspected relationship with Agrippina or Caligula's alleged relationship with his sisters, the personal relationships and sexual practices these rulers engaged in were often the subject of rumor. No one in Roman historiography can know what happened behind closed doors in the imperial residences. It is up to the Roman historians and the imagination of the people to make inferences as to how individuals gained honors or visibility under each emperor and, in some cases, to believe shocking stories that justified an emperor's downfall and tarnished his image, which fit into a familiar category of tyrannical *topoi*. Dio's accounts of Nero and Caligula, and especially Elagabalus, reveal that frequently an emperor's personality or negative traits, including something like sexual deviancy, are not enough for removal, but often accelerates their ruin by offending their main constituents in the senate and army, or Praetorian Guard. The displeasure generated by an emperor's behavior is evidenced in historians like Dio, who have the "social and cultural standing necessary to make moral judgments about emperors, though those judgments are alienated from the actual political decision-making process."³⁷⁷ For authors like Dio, public sentiment (or the sentiments of the elite) and belief carried significant weight in justifying an emperor's rule. That rule is also justified by the emperor gaining the support of the right political constituencies. What an emperor's bedroom behavior, his public image or actions, and his appearance demonstrated about him or meant to the Roman elite was an efficient piece of rhetoric in condemning his rule by creating an image of the ruler that necessitated his removal or left doubts about his reign.

Most importantly, as a member of the ruling elite and writing during his contemporary period, Dio had to write a narrative that shared, to some extent, the current regime's view of the

³⁷⁷ Kemezis, "The Fall of Elagabalus," 384.

recent past, where chaotic tyranny is often defeated by good order.³⁷⁸ There is undoubtedly an “overarching dynastic design” present in Dio’s characterization of Elagabalus the “*homo omnium impurissimus*” and a despot that is “heir to the tradition of imperial tyranny and the stereotypical *topoi* of classical literature.”³⁷⁹ The narrative generates a sense of contour, climax, and closure, where Severus Alexander, as the pure *princeps*, restores order, a theme present when emperors like Vespasian take power to restore political and moral traditions, which had been upset by the “bad” Julio-Claudian emperors in Dio’s narrative. It is difficult to argue that Dio’s present circumstances shaped every aspect of his narrative. He wrote a history that contains not only gossip or rumors but faithful accounts of military actions, political achievements, and natural disasters, as well as an implicit philosophy about human nature and good rulership. Still, those circumstances surely impacted what accounts and stories he chose to pull from when writing biographical accounts of past emperors, which is why many of the accounts demonstrate emperors behaving in ways that others replicate or make worse, leading up to the culmination of all the bad in Elagabalus.³⁸⁰ The standard *topoi* of tyranny were available to Dio, and he made good use of them, especially when discussing sex or sexuality, to demonstrate how an emperor violated himself, the *libertas* and *dignitas* of his subjects, and the functioning of the state. As outlined in Chapter One, Romans were hypervigilant about sexuality and its implications on the social hierarchy; it was only natural to be shocked, outraged, or concerned with how the man at the head of their world behaved or enabled others to behave. There is undoubtedly moralizing, just as historians like Suetonius and Plutarch incorporated into their works, and it is part of a

³⁷⁸ Rantala, “Ruling in Purple,” 119. Dio likely finished writing his work between A.D. 220 and 231, meaning most of it was done under Severus Alexander’s reign.

³⁷⁹ Mader, “History as Carnival,” 168.

³⁸⁰ Mader, “History as Carnival,” 134.

trajectory in which sexual misconduct, an inherent feature of one-man rule for Dio, was visible in a bad emperor or a tell-tale sign of his reign.³⁸¹ Laws and traditions had been violated, wrongdoings must be punished, and the harmony of the state had to be restored, often by members of the elite or the emperor's entourage who could no longer bear to witness the self-inflicted degradation of the ruler. With the narrative propagated by Severus Alexander and the elite in Rome, it would be easy for Dio to find the similarities in the past and capitalize upon them in his narrative to create a system of behavior in emperors that were held in low esteem by the elite to relate to his contemporary world.

II. Cassius Dio, Sex, and the Emperor: Epilogue

This thesis's goal was to complete a review of the literary theme of sex in Cassius Dio's *Roman History* by examining its application to a small sample of his imperial portraits and to explain what each instance where sex was mentioned was supposed to indicate to the audience. Chapter One, the foundation for examining each emperor, outlined the Roman elite's perception of normal and abnormal sexual practices for men and women and how what the emperor did in his bedroom could affect his rule. Men were not to be penetrated by another man, women were not to exceed their public and private duties, and the emperor was supposed to represent and exhibit

³⁸¹ Mader, "History as Carnival," 141. Caligula, Nero, Vitellius, and Domitian are evoked frequently when examining sexual practices, gluttony, dinner pranks, nighttime escapades, and more, which are standard tyrannical *topoi*; Rantala, "Ruling in Purple," 123. Claudius is also evoked because, just as he was ruled over by cunning women, Elagabalus is put on the throne as a boy by his grandmother and mother, who take a masculine persona on as they direct Elagabalus and become the dominant woman over a man instead of a dominant man over a submissive woman.; Cleve, "Some Male Relatives," 203. "Weak women" were forced to exercise political and administrative power in the Roman Empire to save the dynasty from the destruction wrought by its male members, like Caracalla and Elagabalus.

the peak of Roman morality. Chapter Two discusses the Julio-Claudians, a small group of emperors in Dio's narrative, whose reputations for sexual excess or abnormalities contribute to establishing their reign as bad or questionable. Dio left the judgment of Tiberius to the readers, leaving the emperor's reign ambiguous. Tiberius's sexual excess and unacceptable sexual partners, from freeborn youth to other men's wives, cause the reader, just like Dio, to question how he maintained his position without being assassinated early in his reign. Caligula degrades his family name further by having rumored incest with his sisters and a same-sex relationship with one of their husbands, promotes corrupt favorites, installs a brothel in the imperial palace stocked with noble freeborn citizens, and has a voracious sexual appetite. Caligula assaults the *libertas* and *dignitas* of his subjects and engages in criminal acts, many sexual in nature. His sexual appetite leads to poor decision making, cruelty, and mockery of Roman traditions or norms, which gains the ire of the Praetorian guard and ends in his assassination. Claudius, just like Tiberius, is left in an ambiguous position, but his sex life and partners create doubts about his ability to rule. He gives way to Messalina, who appears to begin a relationship to replace him as emperor; he commits incest with his niece and changes the law to allow it, and, ultimately, is succeeded by her son due to her power over him, which will threaten the stability of the empire during his reign. Nero, the last Julio-Claudian, ensures the dynasty's end through his depraved sexual behavior, effeminate demeanor, promotion of corrupt favorites, and almost losing Britain. Chapter Three, the conclusion, deals with Dio's contemporaries. It excludes emperors like Commodus and Caracalla and focuses on the worst emperor Dio lived to see and stresses his narrative purpose and desire to write about the emperor with a focus on his gender and sexuality. In each chapter, I address the specific instances in which sex, or the emperor's *libido*, plays a role in his decision-making, his reputation, or his relationship with the elite (especially when it

directly harms them) and, in some cases, his assassination. I address what the audience is supposed to infer about each instance and how they, the elite, would know how to judge the emperor based on the core traditional values and ideas about gender and sex that are ingrained in the Latin language, law, and custom. Concepts of *libertas*, *dignitas*, *stuprum*, *incestum*, or terms specifically related to sexuality, like *mollis*, or *cinaedus*, are used to demonstrate that the Roman elite was aware of, and possessed, the vocabulary to understand what sexual deviance implied about the emperor. The last emperor discussed, Elagabalus, is the culmination of all the negative traits and behaviors found in the narrative, especially the misconduct of the Julio-Claudians. The constraints of a master's thesis limited the pool of emperors who could be treated, so the study is focused on some of the most notorious bad emperors: the Julio-Claudians and Elagabalus. However, continued work would, I believe, find in Dio's account the same, even increasingly worse, behaviors in emperors like Domitian and Caracalla.

In Dio's *Roman History*, sexual deviance functions as a tyrannical *topos* to reveal the emperor's immoral character and illustrate their inadequacy to rule. The repetition of accounts of sexual deviance found in the Roman historiography, like Suetonius or Tacitus, or dilutions and reinterpretations of those events that exist in *Roman History*, culminate, for Dio, with a scolding account of Elagabalus that primarily features sexual misconduct. It demonstrates that criticizing the emperor's sex life was an effective form of addressing the emperors conduct and a shared theme for Roman historians. Roman historians' agendas vary from moralizing, gossiping, or, in the case of Dio, employing a narratological goal that combines all of them. The generational discontent and grumblings of a repressed or neglected elite can be discerned within *Roman History*. Dio's narrative merges the Roman past and Dio's present to create a sense of an empire where the ruler's misconduct directly affects the empire's stability, reinforces or deteriorates its

socio-political hierarchy, and is a source of concern for the elite; “sexual deviance and imperial power were not a happy match.”³⁸² Dio uses the Roman historiographical tradition, found in Plutarch, Tacitus, and Suetonius, to highlight an emperor's morality, suitability for rule, and effect on the empire. Senators and equestrians were outraged, the troops unruly, the provinces in danger, and the moral fabric of society inflamed by an emperor's licentious misconduct. All the themes in other bad emperors culminate in Dio's grand finale, Elagabalus, who displayed traits common to previous tyrants. What this thesis leaves out, other than several “bad” emperors, is that Dio frames Severus Alexander as a return to tradition and conservative values, potentially leaving the reader of his complete history with a sense that the problems of Elagabalus's reign had been resolved, even if temporarily, which makes sense given that Dio finished the narrative toward the end of his life before he could have seen the assassination of Severus Alexander and the subsequent 3rd-century crisis. Dio's concern for social malaise and the uncontrollability of the state and a sole ruler (who did not always work with the elite) is represented powerfully in one of the most shocking *exempla* available, sexual deviancy. Even though the emperors of the past, like the Julio-Claudians, are bad or ambiguous, it is a stark contrast to the period he lived in, which he describes as a descent “from a kingdom of gold to one of iron and rust.”³⁸³ Dio viewed sexual misconduct as an ever-present pitfall of monarchical rule, where one man with the ultimate power could, if he was not of upright moral character, devolve into behaviors that threatened the Roman world, especially threatening the safety of the elite and the political order. Finally, Dio's audience understood the implications, the laws, the taboos, and the nuances of proper sexual relationships and, when reading his history, could pass judgment or justify an

³⁸² Chrysanthou, “Sex and Power,” 618.

³⁸³ Dio, *Roman History*, 71.36.4.

emperor's removal based on sexual misconduct (with other standard tyrannical *topoi*). Dio, writing retrospectively, designed his narrative so that readers could identify their day's unusual circumstances or gossip and find similarities in the past that reinforced their beliefs about rulership and morality. Dio did not rewrite Roman history, but he did tailor it, or retell it, with a purpose and narrative goal in mind, in which his contemporary time was not so dissimilar from the past but certainly more extreme. Had Severus Alexander's administration perpetuated Elagabalus's deviancy, then Dio's account of past emperors was there to furnish evidence and justification for removing him.

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